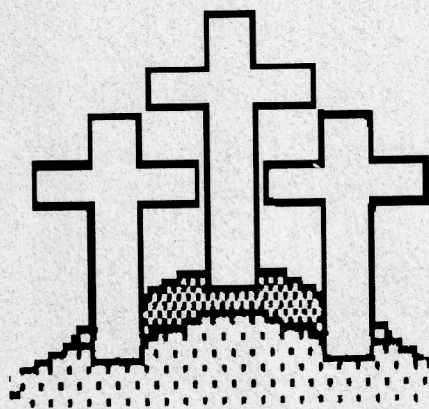
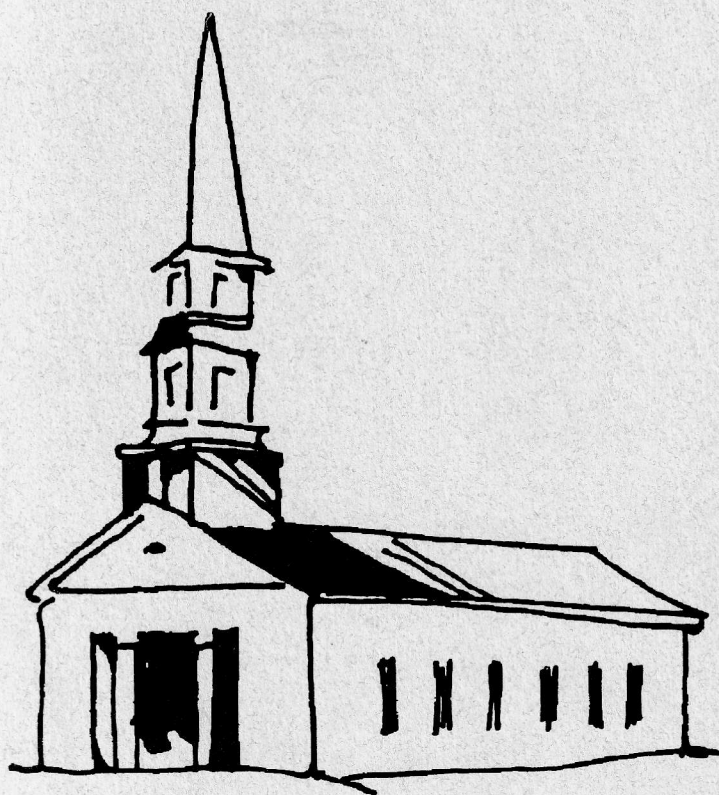


# Gone... But Not Too Far

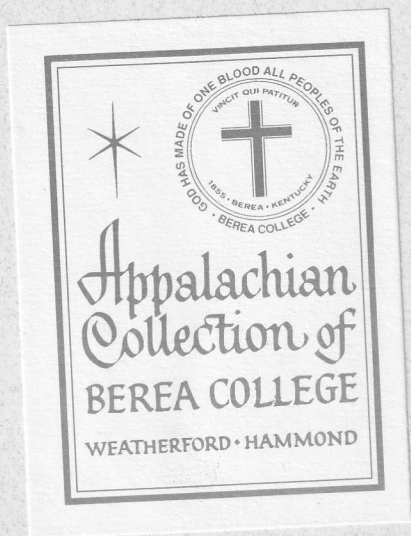


*"Gone But Not Forgotten"*

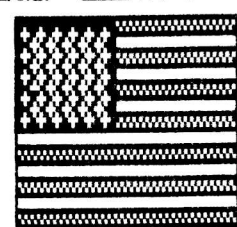
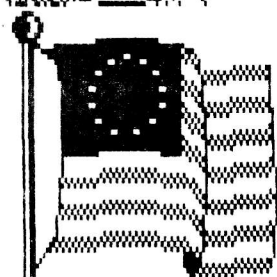
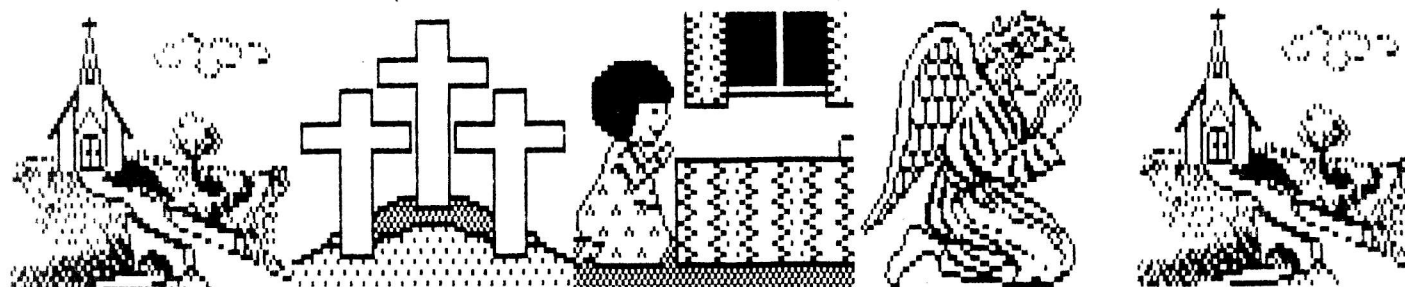
By

K. Carson Kirk

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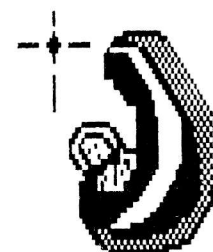
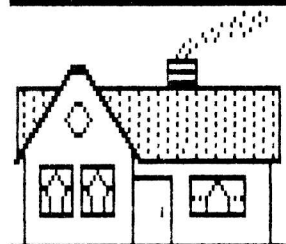




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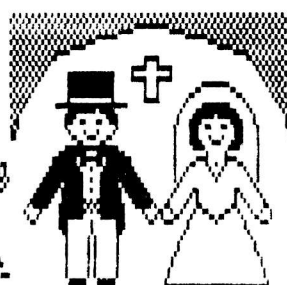
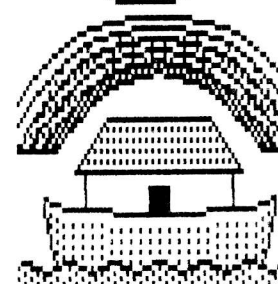


# GONE... BUT NOT TOO FAR



by

K. Carson Kirk



WENT  
BUT NOT  
TOO FAR

K. Carson Kirk



*This book is dedicated to the following people:*

*My wife Aleze.  
She never had any doubts that I would someday get it all together.  
Without her encouragement I couldn't have done it.*

*My brother Clay  
for his interest in my stories.*

*Mrs. Fred C. Bose  
of Stone Mountain, Georgia.  
I guess she has asked me a hundred times or more,  
"Mr. Kirk, what are you doing about your stories?  
I want you to gather them into a book."*

*Janice Kirk Gabbard  
for all the hard work she had to do to get all this together.  
She also chose the illustrations that you will find  
throughout the book.  
A caring person she is and I love her for that.  
Thanks, Janice.*

*And last but certainly not least--  
all the dear people that I have written about in these stories.  
Most of them have been gone for a long time but in my mind  
..."Not Too Far." They are ever present in my memories.  
God Bless.*

*Please read and enjoy -  
K. Carson Kirk*

## C O N T E N T S

Gone, But Not Too Far  
A Glimpse of Myself  
Every Household Should Have Some  
Rich Man, Poor Man  
Ronnie  
Old Haw, Haw  
Box Seats  
How Far To The Top, Mamma  
Mountain Doctor  
Any Day Now  
My Kind of Store  
Dewey John  
I Sat Up Front  
He Stands In The Front Ranks  
Watching The Cars Go By  
The Old Peddler  
He Works The Gardens of Heaven  
He Deserved Better  
Humble Bones  
Horse Shirt Battle  
The Tree, Again  
Stone Face  
Good Man  
Master Mind of Pranks  
Christmas In The 30's  
Five Acres--More or Less  
The Knob  
My Silver Dollar  
Hitchhiker  
Window of Love  
Old Red  
A Hundred Years or More  
A Late Salute. . .  
A Lotta Bull  
Treasures of My Heart  
El Toro  
Tall As Old Stone Face  
Old Flame  
Just Call Me Peg  
Woman

Homecoming  
Angus  
Country Boy  
The Driverless Pontiac  
Things I Miss  
I Don't Believe in Haints  
His Journey Home  
Fritzie  
A Mother's Love  
Sergeant Paulick  
Road Hog  
Just Like Yesterday  
Old Retired Miner  
Just Want You To Know  
Last Bouquet  
He Strolls Through My Memories  
If I could Write A Song  
That Chair  
Just Want To Say Goodbye  
The Good-Hearted Swede  
How Do You Say Goodbye  
They Sleep Peacefully  
He Was Leaving  
They Reached For The Stars  
Some Things Never Change  
They Fought A Good Fight  
Camp Blanding Memories  
Some Memories Not Shared  
Me 'N George, Wright, Roy And Virgil  
Prologue



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## PREFACE

The first story of Carson's I read was *Some Things Never Change* and it brought a tear to my eyes. It had been published in the *Powell Valley News*, the only newspaper in Pennington Gap, Virginia. At the time I didn't know who Carson was but being a Kirk myself and working on a genealogy of the family, I recognized some of the names in that story.

I immediately set out to find Carson. I wrote a letter to the newspaper stating my interest in the story and my wish to get in touch with the author. About a week later Carson wrote me a note and I called him. That was the beginning of a friendship that means a lot to me.

Carson is not only a relative and a friend but a marvelous storyteller. I say storyteller, rather than author, because his stories read like he's sitting around the fireplace telling stories from his childhood. And, like sitting in front of a fireplace listening to a parent or grandparent talk of the "olden days", Carson's stories take us back to our own childhood.

We have all wished we could go back in time to when life was simpler; when we played all day or did our simple chores alongside a parent or grandparent; when we had no responsibilities. Carson's stories take us back to that time, in mind and heart. They take us home.

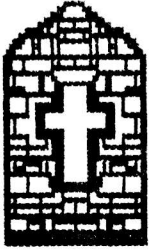
We've all heard the expression, "you can't go home, again." You can when you read Carson's stories. They will evoke the smells, sights, sounds and feelings of your childhood. Memories will fill your very soul and you will be transported to the "olden days."

Besides the childhood memories, Carson's stories will also bring back memories of courting, marriage, war, adolescence, friendship, bravery, death and Christmas; in essence, life. And that's what they are all about--life.

Enjoy!

Janice W. (Kirk) Gabbard

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## GONE, BUT NOT TOO FAR

I remember my dad long ago telling me about his blind grandmother and his grandfather, who was a travelling preacher, what they called a circuit rider. He'd go away from home and sometimes would be gone for a week or longer.

My grandfather, as a young boy, stayed home with his brothers to do the farming and take care of the place while his father was gone. The blind mother would do the housework and cook for the large family. She died in 1925.

I remember my dad taking me across the hill from where we lived to the old grave yard. We picked wild strawberries along the way. We always went on Memorial Day--Decoration Day, we called it.

I stood before her tombstone and since I was too young to read, asked my dad what that said below her name. "Gone, but not forgotten," he said.

I said, "Daddy, what does that mean?"

"Well, that means she's gone but...uh!"

I said, "Not too far?"

He looked at me kinda funny and said, "Yes, that's right. Gone, but not too far." After that, he would always say, "Gone, but not too far," when he was talking about her.

He took me out and showed me the old house and barn which was a short distance from the old grave yard. He said, "She used to come out on that porch. She would feel her way along the wall, come out and look around.

Now, my brothers, cousins and I used to come over here and try to slip up on her. She could hear real good and she could tell who you were by your walk. No, you couldn't slip up on her. She would rub our faces with her hands and tell us how good we looked."

I said, "Daddy, could she see?"

"No Son, not with her eyes. But in her mind, yes, she could see."

Well, as I got a little bigger I'd get me a stick and pretend it was a gun and say I was going out squirrel hunting. I would climb the hill behind our house, go through the coal bank field, on up through the woods on top of the ridge and sit down under an old dead chestnut tree.

I would look out over this old empty farm and down at the grave yard. With my young mind I'd think, 'Gone, but not too far.' With a little imagination I could see my grandpa and his brothers as young boys working in the fields.

Smoke coming from the chimney meant the blind mother was cooking dinner for them. About noon time I could see her feel her way out on the porch; hear her call--'Alex, Jasper, Elihu, Robert, Benny, come on in. Let's eat and rest awhile. It's awful hot out there.'

Later on in the day I would look out across the fields and coming out of the woods, I could see a tall figure wearing a black hat and shiny, black leggins, riding on a pretty black horse. I could hear one of the boys holler, 'Hurry up, let's get this work done. Pap's coming home.'

I would drop off to sleep then and near dark a flock of crows would wake



me up with their wild chatter. I would jump up, run down the hill and look across that old barbwire fence at the tombstones. With the falling darkness, I'd suddenly realize that the only life here was me and those wild crows on the ridge. Running scared and looking back, I'd head out for home. I'd run into the house and holler, "Momma, I've been squirrel hunting!"

She would say, "Look at your dirty feet. Come here and let me clean your nose."

Later on that night we would gather around the old fireplace and Dad would tell us some more about his blind grandmother. How glad she was to see Ben when he got back from World War I. I'd say, "Daddy, could she see?"

"No Son, not with her eyes but with her mind. Yes, she could see." Then he'd say, "She's gone, but not too far."

Now many years have passed and I'm a lot older but I want to go back there, walk up that hill through the coal bank field, on up in the woods to the top of the ridge and sit down under that old tree.

The old house and barn have been long gone but as I sit there, I want to go back and see the boys working in the fields, see the blind mother groping her way out on the porch and call out, 'Alex, Jasper, Elihu, Robert, Benny, come on in, dinner's ready. It's awful hot out there.' And later, see that tall rider come out of the woods on that pretty black horse and hear one of the boys yell, 'Hurry up with that work. Pap's home.'

I'll fall off to sleep then, but I want the crows to wake me before dark so I can go down and look at that old tombstone that says, *Rebecca Kirk, Gone But Not Forgotten*. Then I'll light out for the house, scared and looking back over my shoulder. I'll run in and holler, 'Momma, I've been squirrel hunting!' She'll say, 'What, again? Don't wipe your nose on your shirt sleeve.'

Later on that night I want to squeeze in around that old fireplace and hear Dad tell some more about his blind grandmother. About the time her clothes caught on fire and she was burnt pretty bad--one of the girls put out the fire. Then he'll say, 'She's gone, but not too far.'

I can't ask him again what that means 'cause he's gone now, too, but not too far. I can still hear him, 'Yeah, me, George, Wright, Roy and Virgil, we used to go over there and try to slip up on her. But she could hear real good; you couldn't slip up on her. No, sir!'

Now, years later, my dad, his father, his preacher grandfather--the tall rider that I could imagine seeing riding out of the woods coming home--are all laid to rest. As long as I live I will treasure the memories and, I must admit, some rather wild imaginings which they all added to my childhood.

She would come out on that porch and call out, 'Alex, Jasper, Elihu, Robert, Benny, come on in. Let's eat and rest awhile. It's awful hot out there.'

I can see that tall rider come out of the woods on that pretty black horse and hear one of the boys holler, 'Hurry up with that work. Pap's home.' The wild chatter of the crows on the ridge....

Yes, they've gone now, but not too far.

## A GLIMPSE OF MYSELF

I did go back there. I walked through the coal bank field on up to the top of the ridge and sat down under an old tree. I looked out over the old place that's hung in my memories for so many years.

No longer could I see the green fields that, as a little boy, I could imagine and see my Grandpa and his brothers working the crops.

No longer could I see the blind mother feel her way out on the porch and call them to dinner.

No longer could I see the tall rider come out of the woods. No crops, no cattle grazing, no voices yelling out, 'Get that work done, Pap's home.'

It's all forest now and I can't see the old graveyard from up here.

So, I sat there, disappointed, and knew that it could never happen again. I dozed off for I don't know how long and the crows woke me with their wild chatter, just as they had many years ago.

I got up and walked down the hill, where I used to run, to the old graveyard. The fence is no longer there and it seems more lonely than ever surrounded by the trees.

I walked among the tombstones. Some are just plain rocks with no markings.

Before leaving I took a last look at that old tombstone that says, *Rebecca Kirk, Born 1854, Died 1925, Gone But Not Forgotten*. Alongside her rests that tall rider, *Rev. Richard Kirk, Born 1850, Died 1950*.

Then I turned and walked away. Not scared and looking back as I had done as a boy, but slowly and with sadness in my heart. Sad because I could no longer run in the house and tell Momma, 'I've been squirrel hunting!' and hear her say, 'Don't wipe your nose on your shirt sleeves.' And sadder, that I could not squeeze in around that old fireplace and hear Dad say, 'She's gone, but not too far.'

Sad too, because I came to catch a vision but only caught a glimpse of myself. I now realize these people are a part of me and I belong more in their time than I do in mine. As they go a part of me goes with them.

It's not with sadness that I say, with the ones that are already gone and the ones that are going, then I must go also, for I belonged more in their time with the mule, the plow and the hoe. That's why I'm so restless in these times. I would feel more out of place in the future.

So one can only hope after we all lay resting that someone will walk among our headstones and say, 'Gone, but not too far.'





## EVERY HOUSEHOLD SHOULD HAVE SOME

Whatever became of *Cloverine Salve*? Back when I was growing up in Lee County, Virginia, everybody used *Cloverine Salve*. It was used for burns, cuts, sprains, pains and most anything and everything that ailed you.

The salve company ran little ads in magazines and newspapers, directed at young folks mostly. You could send off for your order of a dozen tin boxes or more. It was packed in a cardboard tube, one dozen per tube. You could take it from door to door and sell it. If you were lucky enough to have most of it sold to your relatives before it arrived, you were considered a smart salve dealer. But you had to remember that you had a deadline to sell it, send the company their money, and keep the rest, which would be a dollar or so per dozen. At that time, back in the 1930's and early '40's, one dollar would buy you as much as five dollars these days.

I remember when I was nine years old, I sent off for some salve. I didn't have many relatives living close by to sell any salve to and my neighbors were as poor as my family.

I hung around the general store down the road from where I lived, trying to peddle it. But with no success. To tell you the truth I wasn't much of a salesman. I was too bashful and I could never remember what to say. The only line I could remember was "Every household should have some." That is, if I could get my tongue going. That didn't go over real big coming from a nine-year old to an adult.

Well, I rocked along for about a month and a half. Hadn't sold a single box. Behold! One day when I went to the mailbox there was this official looking letter addressed to me. I opened it and, let me tell you, I got the scare of my life! It seems I had broken a contract with the salve company. They wanted their money without delay or else. It struck me from reading this important letter, that the sheriff would be knocking on my door any minute.

Well, early the next morning, I set out on a sales trip that would amount to about six miles round trip over an old dusty road. I thought with the number of houses I would call on, I could sell the salve with ease. I just had to in order to keep the sheriff off my back.

I set out working one side of the road with plans to work the other side on my way back if I had any salve left to sell. I would walk up, knock on the door, and by the time someone answered it, I was so scared and nervous that it took all the courage I could muster to get the words out. With shaking hand I would hold up the salve and whisper, "Every household should have some."

It seems that every household already had *Cloverine Salve* or didn't have the money to buy it. So by the time I started to double back and call on the other side of the road, I had failed to sell even one of the dozen cans.

I was hot, tired and dirty. To make things worse it began to rain. As my muddy, bare feet carried me from door to door, I became more weary. Finally, the last house on the road came into view, the one I had intended to avoid if at all possible. Its size and well-kept appearance alone had always

made me uneasy.

I knew that the family who lived there, like the house they lived in, was about two stories above me. But since this was my last chance, for this day anyway, I finally forced myself to open the gate, cross the grassy lawn, climb the steps to the porch, and ring the doorbell.

A lady's voice from within said, "Come in."

When I opened the screen door to enter I could see her at the other end of the room. She was busy sewing something. Before she had time to stop me I walked across the room, holding out the salve, and barely able to utter said, "Every household should have some."

In my frame of mind I hadn't given the first thought to my soaked, dripping clothing and muddy feet.

She jumped up from the chair and looked at me with what I thought at the time was hate and contempt. She grabbed me, yelling over and over, "Look at what you've done to my floor!" As she pushed me back toward the door I could see the mud all across the shiny, hardwood floor. The same on the porch as she shoved me down the steps.

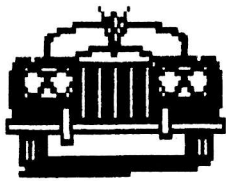
I can't begin to tell you how I felt inside. Perhaps if something similar happened to you when you were a child you can understand. I started crying. When I reached the gate she put her hand on my shoulder and stopped me. She dropped to her knees and began to wipe away the tears. The expression on her face had changed from anger to kindness.

For a long time she rubbed my face and consoled me. As I stared at this beautiful lady's face with that big house in the background, I knew that tenderness and love lived there. Every house should have some.

She took the salve from my hands, all of it, and gave me a folded ten dollar bill, kissed me on the cheek and sent me on my way.

The salve company got their money. There was enough left for me to have a new pair of overalls and a pair of shiny new shoes.

Now, many years later, I am a soft touch for any neighborhood kid with something to sell. Especially the scared, timid ones. I try to return the favor of long ago. It gives me a warm feeling. Try it sometime 'cause every household needs some!



## RICH MAN, POOR MAN

It was 1938 and I was twelve years old. I had hoed corn two days for my grandpa for twenty-five cents per day and boy, he could work you hard, too!

I got fifty cents in my pocket so I walk in to Woodard's Store, get me a bag of Bull Durham, an R.C. Cola and Moon Pie. I still got thirty cents left, enough to go see the double feature at St. Charles on Saturday.

I'm going with old Chester, my cousin. He's about two years older than me. He told me, he said, "You get out and make you some money and we'll go to the show on Saturday." A *show bean* he called it.

Well, I walk out of the store drinking my R.C. and eating my Moon Pie, the Bull Durham in my shirt pocket with the yellow strings hanging out.

Somebody had just parked a black car in front of the store. That was the prettiest thing that I had ever seen. Now there's nobody sitting in it, so I decided I would look it over. Ain't nobody around here owns that car. Some of the young fellows have Model A's and Chevrolet convertibles but this is something else.

I moved around front where I could see the name. Packard. Lord, I've never seen anything like this. Whoever owns this has gotta be rich. I looked it over good, inside and out. I could just see myself sitting in it, under that wheel--don't care if it ever moved or not, just so I can sit in it.

I walked around to the shady side of the store. They had about three nail kegs around there to sit on but you had to get there early in the morning to get one of them seats. Some of the fellows would come in there early and occupy those seats all day long. The only other place to sit was on a fence that connected on the store. And as usual the seats were all taken.

Perched upon that fence was a young man, I'd say about twenty years old. And, who-ee--was he dressed up! Expensive looking gray suit, pretty blue shirt with stripes in it, and a light gray hat cocked over his right eye. And would you look at them shoes--wing tips, black and white. Lord-ee! This is the one that owns that Packard. I know it is, he's rich.

Then I think--boy, you've worked two days in the hot sun and made fifty cents. Now you're looking at a rich man.

I pulled out my Bull Durham and started to roll one. I seen him reach in his shirt pocket and pull out a pack of tailor-mades. He reached them toward me and said, "Have one, kid."

I took one and lit it up. Tailor-mades, ummm! Sure does taste better than that Bull Durham. They're Wings. Everybody that can afford them, that's the kind they smoke, is Wings.

I took a few draws and ambled back around front to look some more at that Packard. I'm standing there daydreaming and admiring it when he walks up behind me and says, "You want to sit in it? Go ahead."

I hesitate; this can't be true. He opens the door and motions, so I get in. Lord! I've never been in anything like this before. Look at that hood, how long it is. And the leather seats and the way it smells. I wonder what



this feller does to be so rich?

He gets in on the driver's side and lights up another tailor-made. "How would you like to take a ride in this thing, kid?" I thought, this is too good to be true. I was speechless so I just nodded my head yes.

Then he leaned over and half whispered, "Have you got any money, kid?"

I said, "Yeah, I got thirty cents."

He said, "Look, I'm out of gas. I just coasted in here. Now if you will let me have that thirty cents that will get me about three gallon and get me back to Kentucky.

"You see I'm courting this girl over here and I'm trying to impress her. Now I don't want any of these people to know that I'm out of gas and broke. So you give me that thirty cents and I'll pay you back the next time I see you."

With a shaky hand I handed him the thirty cents and we pushed the Packard up to the gas pumps and spent my thirty cents. We got in and headed toward Kentucky. About a mile up the road I told him to stop on that curve and let me out. "I live right down under the hill."

He stopped the Packard, turned and looked at me and said, "Now, I'll give your thirty cents back the next time I see you and here--have another tailor-made."

I got out and watched him pull away and head up the mountain toward Kentucky. Then tears came in my eyes. "There goes my show bean, what's Chester gonna say."

Then I thought--wipe them tears away, you're twelve years old. At least you got to ride about a mile in that pretty Packard. But I ain't got no show bean! Lord, that's the poorest rich man I have ever seen!

\*\*\*\*\*

On a cold rainy night in December, 1946, been over here in Harlan County, Kentucky. Stayed out too late, started back home and my old car conked out. I'm all wet and cold, my cigarettes are soaked, there's no traffic this time of night, no houses around either. I'm scared, too. Don't know what to do.

I bought this old wore-out car when I got back from World War II--it's been broke down more than it's run. I don't know how long I've been sitting here shaking. Got all wet trying to work on it under the hood.

Well, I see some headlights. God knows who would be out this time of night. I'm afraid to stop them and I'm afraid not to. So I get out and stand there beside the car in the rain. I can't get any wetter than I already am.

The car slows down, comes to a stop. The door opens, "Get in, you got car trouble."

"Yes," I said. "It just quit on me and I've run the battery down trying to get it going."

He says, "Well, it's raining too hard to mess with it now. Where do you live?"

"Oh, just across the mountain in Virginia," I tell him.

He looks down at his gauges. "Well I guess I've got enough gas to get you over there and get back home."

"Now I ain't got no money to pay you with," I tell him. "I'm broke."

"Oh, that's alright, I ain't gonna charge you anything. I believe in helping when I can."

We headed out up the mountain. His old car didn't look any better than mine I thought, but at least it's running and warm inside.

He reaches me a can of Prince Albert. "Here, have a smoke. You're lucky I came along this time of night. My neighbor just took bad sick and I took him to the hospital tonight. He ain't got nobody and I've been kinda looking out for him for a few months now."

We finally get to the top of the mountain. He puts the car out of gear, turns off the motor and coasts down the other side to save gas.

I tell him, "You can let me out on that curve at the foot of the mountain. I live right down under the hill." He pulls over to the side of the road at the curve and stops. I notice that he's staring at me in the dark.

Finally he reaches up and turns on his dome light. Then I see what he looks like. He's a young man, but older than me. His face shows more age than it should. His hands are rough and scarred from hard work. The clothes he has on have seen better days. The thin jacket was more suited for a warm spring night. An old flop hat was cocked over his right eye.

He looked at me for a long time. Finally he said, "Are you the same young feller I let out here back in the Thirties?"

I nodded yes. By this time I had recognized him, too. Then he smiled and put his hands on my shoulders.

"Look, I always meant to give you back that thirty cents but you know how it is. Just never seen you again. You know that girl that I was courtin, I married her. Yes, we had three kids, the oldest seven and the youngest a year and a half. But I lost my wife about a year ago. It's been tough sledding

with the mines slack and not getting much work. I'm trying to bring them little ones up. With the Lord's help I'll do it, too.

"Here, roll yourself another smoke. Hey, I tell you what, after work tomorrow I'll come over here and get you. We'll see if we can get your old car going. I'm a pretty fair mechanic. Maybe I can fix it."

We sat there and talked awhile. I thanked him and got out. Then he said, "Look, I'm gonna pay you back that thirty cents as soon as I get it."

I was shaking my head as he pulled away. "Mister, you just paid it back with interest." I watched his taillights disappear up the mountain toward Kentucky.

While I was standing there, wet and cold, tears started down my face again. But that's alright the rain will wash 'em away--this time it's different. For the first time in my life I feel warm and good inside.

Lord, that's the richest poor man I have ever seen!



## RONNIE

What have I ever done? Well...not much to be proud of. Oh, there's some things I could hold up and say I'm proud of. But folks could just punch them full of holes.

There is one thing I'm proud of and I think if the Good Lord keeps score on these kind of things, he has put a check mark after my name for this one.

When I was growing up in Lee County, Virginia, there was this boy, Ronnie, about the same age as me. He was growing up too...but, not in mind. I saw him for the first time in Sunday School at Pine Grove Church. He had stayed all night with his brother and he brought Ronnie to Sunday School. He put his arms around my neck and asked, "Will you be my buddy? I love you."

I looked around kinda awkward and embarrassed. I said, "Yeah, Ronnie, I'm your buddy." He hugged me even tighter and laughed with joy. After that he never forgot my name and was always so pleased to see me.

He lived high on a hill and Clarence Napier lived right down below him at the road. Clarence grew up with Ronnie and spent a lot of time with him. He would walk with his arms around Ronnie. I know the Good Lord put a check mark after his name, too.

As time went on, I started working for my uncle in his store, about one and a half miles from Ronnie's home. His mother had always stressed to him to stay off the road. I remember a couple of times he slipped off from the house and waded the creek all the way to the store.

He would come in the store, wet and muddy to his knees, throw his arms around my neck and say, "You're my Buddy. I love you. I'm all wet, will you take me home, please?"

He would beg his mother to let him come down to the road and wait for me to pass when my days work was done. He would be sitting flat on the ground at the mailbox. I can still see him there with the bill of his cap turned to the side of his head. I would pull my uncle's pickup truck over to a stop and Ronnie would get up, looking real scared, till he could see it was me. Then he would throw his arms around my neck and say, "My Buddy. I love you."

I would talk with him for a few minutes and then tell him to go on up to the house. I wouldn't leave until I was sure he had got safely there. He would take off across the creek and up the hill, in his half walk and half run, stop three or four times, wave and holler, "Don't forget to stop and see me again, tomorrow, cause you're my Buddy. I love you."

He grew into a big, strong boy in his teens and it became pretty obvious that the family wouldn't be able to control and take care of him at home anymore. So they made arrangements to take him to this special home off there in another part of Virginia.

One day his older brothers brought him to the store. He was all dressed up and happy to see me as always. One of the brothers said, "Tell him where you're going, Ronnie."

With his arms around my neck, he said, "Buddy, I'm going off to school, but I still love you. I came in for a new pair of shoes. I'm going off to



school."

I said, "Ronnie, you'll come back here all educated and you probably won't even know me, anymore."

"Oh, no," he said. "You're my buddy. I love you. I'll never forget you." We fitted him up in his new shoes and when they started to leave Ronnie put his arms around my neck and asked, "Would you stop and see me sometime? Cause you're my buddy; I love you."

"Yes, Ronnie, I'll stop and see you, Buddy."

I never saw him again and he never came home again except for short visits. Some of the family would visit him from time to time over the years.

But he did get to come home again for good. He died in 1981 at age fifty-five. They buried him there in Pennington Gap. Time and distance kept me from attending his funeral, just as it had all those years that I didn't visit him at his 'school.' If that can be any kind of excuse.

I ordered a bunch of flowers for his funeral and put these words on the card, 'My Buddy, Ronnie. I love you.' That's the least I could do.

So I am proud of this one thing in my life...that I gave a little of my time to Ronnie.

From high on the hill he would come stumbling down.

And there at the mailbox sit on the cold ground.

Just to wait and hug my neck and say, "You're my Buddy. I love you."

Waded the creek up to his knees. "I'm all wet. Will you take me home, please? Cause you're my Buddy. I love you."

"Will you stop by the school and see me sometime, cause you're my Buddy. I love you."

## OLD HAW, HAW



When I first started to work for my uncle in his store at Stone Creek in Lee County, it was back in the days when everything was behind the counter. The customers would tell you what they wanted and you would get it for them. Well, it was the first time I ever saw this one old man. He was gray-headed, chewed tobacco, wore a black felt hat and had arm bands on his arms which pulled the long shirt sleeves up a little from the wrists. They were quite popular back in those days.

"Could I help you?" I asked.

"I doubt it," he said real loud so everyone could hear. "But give me a plug of tobacco." "What kind?"

"That right there in front of you." As he pointed his finger, I reached for it. All of a sudden he yelled, "No, no, not that one. Don't you know nothing?"

By this time, my uncle decided to take over and said, "I know what he wants," and reached for a plug.

"No, no, no. You don't know nothing either." And then, he came behind the counter and got it himself. The same brand that we both had tried to get for him. Then he started to laugh at us.... "Haw, Haw, Haw, Haw."

Well, after that, when he came in I would always try to be busy at something else to keep from waiting on him. But no matter who waited on him, he took up a lot of time and kept other customers waiting. "How much is that roast there?"

You would put it on the scales. "That comes to one dollar and twenty-nine cents and it's all lean...no bone."

"No, I won't pay that. Put it back. That's too much and you know it. How much is that bologna?"

"Twenty-nine cents a pound."

"What? Twenty-nine cents! You all're just robbing people. Well, give me a pound and slice it thick. How about thirty-five cents? How come it's always more than a pound? Don't you know what you're doing? Well, come on, wrap it up. I don't have all day." Then he would start that Haw..Haw..Haw..Haw. It seemed that he wanted to get you good and mad so he could laugh at you.

About once a week he would buy twenty-five pound bags of flour and meal, one hundred pound bags of hog feed and cow feed, along with his other staples. I would have to take him home in my uncle's old pickup truck.

"Do you know how to drive this thing? Well, come on, let's get going. I don't have all day." Then he would start that Haw..Haw..Haw..Haw..when he knew he had me good and mad. He would sit there and ridicule me and spit tobacco juice out the window and all over the door of the truck.

One day I got his feed and groceries all unloaded and started to leave. I said, "See you later, Mr. (His last name)."

"What did you say? Don't you call me that. My name is Bill and you

remember that, boy. You young people don't know nothing. You don't know nothing, hear that. Haw..Haw..Haw..Haw."

That made me feel bad 'cause all I was trying to do was show respect for the old man by calling him Mr. \_\_\_\_\_.

Well, the next time he came in I felt a little more at ease; at least I knew what to call him. So I greeted him with, "How are you today, Bill?"

"What! Did you all hear that?" He looked all around to make sure he had everyone's attention. "Did you all hear that young squirt call an old man like me by his first name? These young people just don't have no sense and respect. Hear me? You just ain't got no sense. Haw..Haw..Haw..Haw."

I was half scared to death. He was standing there glaring at me again. So I said, "Well, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_."

Then he pointed his finger at me and yelled, "No, don't you call me that either. You call me nothing, hear? Understand? Nothing!"

So one day not long after that I saw him walking on the road. I stopped and asked if he wanted to ride. Well, what do you think he said?

"Of course, I want to ride. But don't think you're doing me any favor, 'cause I'm scared to death of your driving." He got in and I noticed he was all dressed up. So I asked him where he was going.

"None of your business," he said. "Don't ask so many questions. But if it will make you feel any better by knowing, I belong to the Masons and I'm on my way to a convention. Now, don't ask me about the Masons 'cause I ain't telling you nothing." He was glaring at me and spitting tobacco juice out the window.

All of a sudden I got this idea and finally got up the nerve to say it, "Hey, Nothing, don't spit tobacco juice out the window. It gets all over the door!"

"What do you mean, don't spit tobacco juice?" he yelled. "It's my juice, and I can spit if I want to. And what was that you called me? Nothing!"

"Well," I said, "that's what you told me to call you the last time you jumped all over me for calling you Bill."

"Boy, that just shows how dumb you are. I didn't mean for you to call me Nothing." About that time he let fly with some more tobacco juice and this time the wind caught it just right and blew it right back in his face.

I started to laugh as he pulled out a red bandanna and began wiping the tobacco juice from his face and eyes. He turned and glared at me but I couldn't stop laughing. "Laugh," he said, "go ahead and laugh and call me Nothing. At least I'm something, I'm nothing. But you're not anything. So, go ahead and laugh."

All at once he started his Haw..Haw..Haw..Haw. There we went down the road both laughing at the same time. When we reached the store and parked I was still laughing. Then he got real serious. You've heard of piercing, black eyes. Well, he had blue eyes, so this was piercing blue eyes.

He glared at me and said, "All my life I've laughed at people. Never laughed with people. I laugh at them. You understand? Now, you young squirt, if you ever tell anybody I laughed with you I'll skin you alive. You hear me? Now shut up your laughing afore I spit tobacco juice all over you."

So he sat there and began his Haw..Haw..Haw..Haw. All by himself because by this time I was too scared to laugh anymore.

A few years later when I had to go off to World War II, he said, "Think you got sense enough to make a soldier? I doubt it, but do the best you can, and maybe, with a little luck, you'll get back. Haw..Haw..Haw..Haw."

After I got back from the war he came into the store one day. "Well, I see you made it," he said. "But I see you didn't learn anything. You got back on pure luck." Then he looked all around to make sure no one was looking and stuck out his hand to shake hands with me.

"I ain't got no habit of going round shaking hands with nobody," he said. "No sir, so don't you ever tell anybody. If I find you did I'll skin you alive, you hear? You hear me, you young squirt? Give me a plug of that tobacco. No, not that. Ain't you got no sense? Haw..Haw..Haw..Haw."



## ON OUR KNEES

Floods have washed around my feet;  
Knives have carved on my body;  
Bullets have been buried near my heart for ages;  
Nails have been drove into me,  
But I still live on.

I stand taller than any building  
In this small mountain town.  
Like the Statue of Liberty, I can see all  
The approaching roads and welcome you.  
But unlike the Statue of Liberty,  
I was put here by God.

Long before the big diesels,  
I've seen the wagons haul the coal,  
And after that, the old belching steam engines.  
I've seen this town through the good and bad.  
Seen it at the point of death,  
And watched it rally back to live on,  
Countless times.

I've seen its toddlers on weak legs,  
Growing into man and womanhood.  
And seen them struggle on feeble legs,  
Only to die.  
But I still live on.

I've watched the miners go to work  
In the early morning,  
And seen a number of them brought back,  
Still and cold,  
Never to return again.

I've seen its sons go off to wars,  
To be maimed or killed in some far off land,  
And I've seen the ones return,  
So proud that they have served.

I've seen this town bustling, boisterous, fighting.  
And on its knees, as it is right now.  
I have lived through it all.

I was here before the first wagon load of coal,  
And before any building was nailed together.  
I am the very heart of this town,  
And a part of America.

My age is not known,  
Since there's no one alive with that information,  
And no birth record shows it.

For, you see, I'm a tree,  
A Sycamore Tree.  
And I'm the very heart and soul  
Of St. Charles, Virginia.

A tree can't talk, you say.  
Well, I'm going to talk anyway.  
Time wouldn't permit me to tell all  
That I have heard and seen under my branches,  
But I have some memories  
I can no longer keep to myself.

So come under my hulking frame  
And sit down in my shade.  
Listen to the wind rustle my leaves,  
For its there you'll hear  
The things I'm about to say. . .

Remember Charlie Wheeler? He spent a life time here. Mayor Charlie, they called him.

In good weather the men would sit under me, whittling and smoking and chewing tobacco--passing the time of day. Tell about how much coal they loaded the past week, and how they could have loaded more if they could have only gotten the empty coal cars.

About the squirrels they shot--never missed a shot--sometimes two squirrels with one shot. And about the fish they caught in Powell River or Tennessee, and the big one that got away.

Somebody finally named it the Liars Club. But me, I like to think that most of it was true.

Yea, I've lived a life time.

We had a high school in those days. School days, the town was filled with young men, boys, and the prettiest girls in Virginia.

The places of business--believe it or not--there was a Kroger store here at one time. Stallards Grocery, Carl Evans, and Clyde Kirk Grocery, and M. C. Williams on the other end of town. Miners Department Store, Smitty's Service Station and a number of cafes, pool halls and barber shops, and Jim Poe's store

at Monarch.

Monarch, Virginia Lee, Benedict, Bonny Blue, Penn Lee, Kenemer Gem. Any of these coal camps, as far as I'm concerned, were all as much a part of St. Charles as I am.

People would fill this town on Saturdays. Some to shop, some to go see Hopalong Cassidy and Tex Ritter at the theater across the street. Always had a double feature on Saturdays. And, Boy! the smell of that popcorn. Others came to just sit in their car and watch other people. The sights you could see sometimes were something to behold.

Jake's Cafe, or Jake's Place. I forgot which they called it. Now, you've heard of the millions of hamburgers that MacDonald's has sold. Shucks! If all the hamburgers that Jake sold were stacked up it would be the highest point in Lee County.

That wasn't all you could get in there either. Lots of them old boys started when they got to town and didn't stop till all the places were closed. When the day was over the last ones to leave would most likely be ready for a cab or taxi to take them home. That is if Bill Fritts hadn't locked them up in the calaboose.

The taxi drivers had names like Roy, Virgil, Wright, Ross, Moss Burke and Stanley, Chester, Ralph, Royce, J. D. and Ed. Some of these old boys would sell you something that would take you into Sunday and a guaranteed headache all day Monday.

Usually on a Saturday we'd have a double header ballgame. Sometimes between St. Charles and Pennington Gap. I can recall a few names--Scott, Barker, Rhea, Martins, Kirk, Young, Rutherford, Stallard, Davis, Wax, Collins, Holman, Parsons and Pannell--it goes on and on. I can't think of all their names.

I think the most exciting times I can recall would be the late 30's and early 40's. I'd just like to go back in time one busy, bustling week before I pass on.

See the miners streaming to and from work and the crowded sidewalks at night. Hear the blaring jukeboxes. See old Bill Fritts going along, cupping his hands over the juke-joint windows trying to see inside...seeing if any of the old boys were out of order.

You heard of Wyatt Earp. Heck, one Saturday night in St. Charles and he would be glad to go back to Kansas City or Dodge City or where ever it was. There was Ervin Fritts, Bill's brother, who helped him and young Clint Hughes. A lot of them tough old boys tested him. And woke up the next day with sore heads.

You know they're always making movies of tough towns out West. You know why they never made one of St. Charles? They can't find people tough enough to play the parts!

I can hear that old steam engine again. Switching and bumping the coal cars; pushing the empties into Bonny Blue and Benedict.

See Old Jake Smith come out and holler at someone across the street. Ol' Mainline comes, gets ready to shine shoes for the day, hollers out, "Going back to Alabama." Charlie Wheeler's the first one in the chair for a shoe shine.

Ol' George Reynolds, 'George Washington', they called him, looking for

someone to buy him a hamburger. Tysee Collier cussing one of the old boys out for kidding him. Crip Garber hobbling along with a walking cane, puffing on his pipe. John Carter ambles over in the shade, tells the latest joke.

Ted Stapleton, 'King Tut', they call him, hangs a sign on me saying, *Game Between St. Charles and Pennington, Saturday at 2:00, Admission 50 Cents.* Go ahead, Ted, drive that nail in me. One more won't hurt.

I can't hardly wait to see old Cowboy Barker hit one past Mutt Williams' Store. From where I stand I can see every bounce it takes. Lefty Scott's pitching boys, so keep him sober on Friday night 'cause old Black Gilley has got everything he owns bet on the game.

Get your hair cut before Saturday because old Guerney will be closed up for the ballgame.

Smell that popcorn from the theater. Everybody coming to see old Hoppy and Tex. There's Claude Robbins with that loud cowboy shirt, 'Colorado', they call him.

Well, all the ones that stay out late, they've caught their taxi home now. Sunday mornings come.

Church of God is filled, back there singing and tambourine clanging. Down the street the Methodist's are filing in and on the hill Preacher Green is warming up at the Baptist Church.

Sunday afternoon. I wait to see old Hardin Stapleton pull in with that old '39 Plymouth with the big speakers on top and play us some of the Chuck Wagon Gang. Wet his fingers, turn to his text and preach us a sermon. See that old-timer with his thumbs hooked in his suspenders. Hear him call out, "Amen, Brother, preach on."

Yeah, we're on our knees but we'll stand again. You people off yonder in other states been reading in the paper this town is dying. Don't you believe it. Right at this minute we're planning on a Fire Department. Oh yes, we've had a little conflict and I sympathize with both sides. My opinion is, it's no ones fault. We're just victims of the times.

There are a few of the old-timers left. There's Virgil Q. Wax. I don't know how come he never takes a picture of me to put in the *Powell Valley News*. A lot of folks off yonder would like to see pictures of me in the paper.

There's George L. Kirk. I don't know how old he is. But I'll tell you one thing, he bounces out of that house every morning, gets in that little car, comes tearing up through here going to work. I think that son of a gun intends to outlive me.

I've been trying to get his attention. I want to ask him if he can get a flag pole for that old, faded flag that stands underneath me and hoist it up here where I can reach out and touch it. Maybe that'll get the people looking up again. Besides, maybe that way they'll see me, too.

Now that I've started to talk after all these years stop by and visit with me. Sit a spell, talk to me. Talk to a tree, you say. Now, I'm going to tell you something, don't you ever tell him I told you but I've been talking to Virgil Wax for years. Don't you ever tell him now.

There's a lot of names I didn't mention but I couldn't think of some of them. But who could ever forget crippled Bud Speck that drove a taxi, or Carl

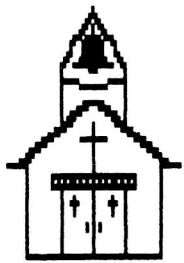


Buchanan, Perry Carter or Sherm Edwards. An Elridge...a Shuler.

Lots of you people are scattered out over the country now. Some have passed on and I've forgot a lot of names. But, I remember your faces. May God bless you all.

Well, I'd better shut up before I get all misty-eyed. This is just too many memories for me. So I'm going to hush now. Thank you for listening to me. And I want to say again, "I am the heart and soul of St. Charles, Virginia. And I stand tall. And we'll come back again, you just wait and see. We'll be back!"

-This message from the Sycamore Tree at St. Charles, Virginia was delivered in 1979.



## BOX SEAT

"Let's go in," my buddy Clarence said. I nodded yes. We had been standing outside this small church with some more young fellows for about half an hour, looking through the windows and open door at the pretty girls inside.

Back in those days in Lee County, Virginia, it was not unusual to see large numbers of young people at church, especially at night, as was the case this time. But most of the young men preferred to remain in the dim light outside and work up some kind of mischief.

As we went in the door we could see that the church was full and all seats were taken, but we didn't mind that. All we really cared to do was stand in the back so we could get a better look at the girls and maybe wink at one, if we could get ones attention. You know how young fellows are.

We had stood there for about two minutes when a man about halfway down the aisle motioned for us to come down there. Not knowing what he wanted, we hesitated, but he kept insisting, so we went on down.

When we got there he told us to sit down on a narrow wooden box about four feet long. We knew that we would stick out like sore thumbs sitting there but we went ahead and sat down anyway, turning red in the face as we could hear the snickers from the young people in the back pews.

We settled down as they were getting warmed up on the pulpit. We had never attended this church before, but it didn't take long for us to see that it was going to be a lively service. They had guitars, banjos and tambourines and along with the singing, amens and foot stamping the building was vibrating.

I thought I could feel some kind of movement, or vibration, in the box we were sitting on, but with all the noise around us I didn't give it much thought.

After a few minutes one of the guitar players stepped off the stage and headed toward us, followed by the tambourine man and four other people. They motioned for us to get off the box. The man with the guitar handed it to Clarence and said, "Hold this, son." At the same time the other man handed me the tambourine.

While this was taking place one of the men was opening the box. He lifted the hinged lid that covered the top of the box to reveal six of the biggest rattlesnakes that I had ever seen.

Now any snake is mean looking to me--and I am deathly afraid of them, whether it be a black snake, garden snake or what have you--and standing this close to these six, mad, rattlesnakes was just a little more than I could stand. I started changing colors, kinda like a tree frog--green, brown and sickly-looking. I looked at Clarence and he looked as bad as I felt right then.

You see, we were both great pretenders. . .

I was always pretending that I wasn't scared of anything when actually I was scared of everything. He was just the opposite; always pretending that he

was afraid of everything. I didn't think he was afraid of nothing up until now, because brother, he wasn't pretending now. He was scared! And I was too scared to pretend that I wasn't.

More people from the pulpit started coming in around us. We started looking for a way out but there was no way. They had us surrounded.

Then they started pulling them snakes out of that box. Usually they take the snakes up to the pulpit and handle them but to our misfortune, it looked like they wanted to put on a demonstration right there.

One man put one around his neck. Another fellow held one high over his head and began to holler, "The Power is on me."

Now, I had been told that the music kept the snakes from striking, so with this in mind and one of them coming closer and closer to me, I started to beat on the tambourine with all I had in me. I glanced at Clarence and he started to strum on that guitar.

They started passing them snakes from one to another and we must have been making pretty good music because nobody seemed to want to take over the instruments. They passed them snakes in front of my face and I bumped my head against everything and everybody trying to stay out of the way. I got sick to my stomach. Oh me, I could have thrown up but I was too scared.

Now if that wasn't bad enough somebody put one of the rattlers on the floor. You talk about getting the lead out! I started jumping up and down as I beat the tambourine and Clarence was doing the same thing--strumming on that guitar while jumping as high as he could. We were like wild men.

One of the snake handlers was looking for someone to pass his off to and after looking us over and seeing how we were jumping up and down, I guess he thought we were ready. He handed it toward Clarence and said, "Is the Power on, brother?" Clarence shook his head no and pointed to me.

So he said, "How about you, Brother?"

I said, "No, not yet, and hey, how about getting that one off the floor."

So here we were making that music and jumping almost to the ceiling because of that rattlesnake loose on the floor. At the same time some of the boys outside had crowded the door and were hollering out, "Give one to the guitar player; the tambourine man wants one; they're ready; the Power's on them."

Well, I knew I couldn't go on any longer, couldn't get out, exhausted from jumping up and down, just was gonna have a heart attack no doubt about it. I had already asked the Lord to give me whatever it was that these folks had that would allow them to pick up these snakes and wrap them around their necks, but he hadn't gave it to me yet.

Just then, when all seemed lost, I heard someone from outside yell, "The law's coming." Now I've been in situations before where, if I heard the law's coming my heart would sink, but what a welcome sound it was this time!

You see the State of Virginia had made it against the law to handle snakes and boy, they started to pop them back in that box. I looked at Clarence and as soon as we seen an opening, we headed for the door. But in our excitement we forgot to lay down the instruments, and at the door we ran right into the arms of the law. They thought we were a part of the snake handling

service and put us under arrest.

Did we ever have a time trying to explain our way out of that one and, of course, the old boys outside were no help either.

Brother, I want to tell you something--to this day I won't sit down on no box, no where, no time, no place. And if someone comes toward me with tambourines I take off for open spaces. No sir, brother, no boxes, tambourines, black snakes, garden snakes, fishing worms, you name it. I don't want any part of it.

A fellow here in Decatur asked me the other day, "Is that story true?"

"Yessir." I said.

"He looked me straight in the eye and said, "Can someone verify it?"

I said, "Sure can."

"Who?"

"Clarence Napier, but he lives off yonder in Virginia."

He said, "Well, that's no problem I can call him."

I said, "Well, I don't know. It may not do any good 'cause he most likely wouldn't remember it. I just talked to him on the phone the other day and his memory is completely gone. He couldn't even remember my name."

Guess that settled that, brother.



## HOW FAR TO THE TOP, MAMMA

On my visits back to Lee County, Virginia, place of my birth, I notice one big change. Those old hillsides where there used to be cornfields, pasture and a lot of cleared land--seems like its all grown up in woods now. A number of people don't even have a garden anymore and've let the weeds grow right up around the windows.

There's some that still have gardens but not as many as before and that's kinda depressing to me. I guess it's just the people that have changed more than anything else.

I can remember back in the Thirties when my uncle lived around the hill from us and him, along with a few other men would walk through the woods and mountains back to Bonny Blue Coal Company to work every day.

At the time my dad walked to Penn-Lee Coal Company to work; a distance of better than four miles one way. He would leave before daybreak and get home after dark.

I think the pay was a dollar a day or near that. I just wonder how many people of today would suffer that kind of hardship. Not many, I'm afraid.

One thing I've always remembered is my dad and others telling how some women had to raise vegetables on those rocky hillsides and carry them across Black Mountain on their backs to sell to the miners at the coal camps in Kentucky. I remember a few of them were still carrying vegetables, eggs, milk and butter across there when I was a young boy. They done this to make ends meet in the family.

I can kinda relate to this myself because my mother worked mighty hard. In the spring and summer she always had a hoe in her hands in the garden, back on those old rocky hillsides where we would try to raise corn.

She would get out in the snow and help me get firewood when I was too young to get the job done by myself. She never peddled vegetables across Black Mountain but she worked mighty hard.

I've often thought of those women following the trails through the woods, loaded down with vegetables, crossing Black Mountain into Kentucky. Some of them would use the old muddy road, but most took the more direct route right through the woods.

In my mind I can see one now with one of her little boys, who is about ten years old, carrying a gallon of milk that she hopes he don't fall down and spill. She's completely exhausted from the heat and the load that she's lugging on her back.

But she keeps trudging on. In her mind she knows she has to get as much money as possible so she can get the kids some shoes for winter. And maybe a pound of coffee from the store. I can hear the conversation.

"Mamma, will you get me a stick of candy?"

"Yes, son."

"And a new pair of overalls?"



"No, not today, son. I won't have that much money."

"Can we rest, mamma?"

"Yes, just for a minute."

"How far is it to the top?"

"It won't take us long. We'll rest longer when we get up there. It won't be bad going down the other side."

They finally reach the top and sit down to rest. "Is that Kentucky, Mamma? Where does it end?"

"Oh, far away son, too far to see."

"How far, Mamma?"

"Oh, hundreds of miles."

"What comes after Kentucky, Mamma?"

"Well, lets see, there's Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and on out west, lots of States."

"New York?"

"No, not in that direction. Its more like over this way. Let's go son, we've still got a long way to go. We'll get a drink of water down in the holler."

They return home late that day and the little boy sleeps with his dreams of Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and on out west, with New York off in the other direction. It had been a great adventure for him.

But for her it was no adventure. Because all she had to look forward to was next week and the next week and the week after that, to cross Black Mountain as many times as possible before winter sets in.

She had lines in her face and stooped shoulders before she reached forty years of age. I hope as the little boy grew up that he noticed this and let his mother know in some way just how much he appreciated the hardships she went through for him.

Maybe he moved off to Illinois, Ohio or New York. If he did, I wonder if he remembered her on her birthday, at Christmas, and wrote a letter once in a while. I hope so.

Most all of these ladies are buried there in Lee County--on the hillsides, in family plots, some in unmarked graves.

Some never crossed Black Mountain but worked just as hard in the corn fields and the tobacco crops or washing clothes on an old scrub board. Their's wasn't a world of fun, games and soap operas. I guess you could say they lived closer to the land and God. I'd like to see a movement across Lee County toward cleaning up those old graveyards and family plots, most of them there in the woods where the fields used to be.

Somebody go in and pull up the weeds; cut down the bushes; set a pot of flowers at their headstone. Don't you think that's the very least we could do for them?

I'm sure it would make them mighty happy to know that they were remembered.



## MOUNTAIN DOCTOR

I will try to tell the story of a young doctor who came to the mountains of Virginia in the 1940's. I say try because I don't believe I could ever do him justice.

I like to think that the Lord sent him there as a kind of sentence, to try and straighten him out, for somewhere along the line his social activities had led to a habit that has plagued mankind, great and small, for ages.

He settled there in Lee County and started taking care of the people in the mining camps and surrounding area. He stayed busy with a steady flow of patients at his office in St. Charles, at the hospital in Pennington, and on the road with house calls.

I think the Lord told him that the days would be hard and long and that the people were in desperate need of someone unselfish. Unselfish he was. He wouldn't refuse a call whether at midnight or the wee hours of the morning. Sometimes he stayed overnight at the people's homes because of the late hour. Most of the time they didn't have the money to pay him.

Most of the people loved him but a few didn't trust him because of his habit. He became the butt of many jokes, but most knew of his brilliant mind. One man told him he didn't have the money to pay with, "But, Doc, just take my wife. I can't stand her anyway."

Doc said, "If you can't stand her, how do you expect me to?" Yes, there's lots of stories about Doc.

He got a call one night when it was snowing, in fact it was a blizzard. He had to go off the main road into the mountains. A short distance off the main road his car stalled. Now he could have walked the short distance back to the main road and caught a ride back into town, but he chose to try and make it to the patient's home which was four or five miles through drifting snow. He didn't make it. When they found him, he was almost frozen to death.

Then there was this one family that lived way back in the mountains. The only road back there was this old logging road that a logging truck ran over. Doc made many trips back there. He would drive his car as far as he could go and they would pick him up in that old logging truck.

On one of his trips back there he went to see one of the sick children. It was bitter cold and when he got back to town he didn't have his coat on. When someone asked him about it, and if he were cold, he replied, "No, not near as cold as that sick child I covered with it there in the mountains."

They also tell about the time just before Christmas when he called on a family with sick children that didn't have anything for Christmas. He went home and gathered up his own children's presents and took them to the home and when the people didn't want to take them he said, "Go on, please take them. I'll get my children's presents later."

As time went by, late night calls without sleep, busy days without stopping to eat, and no real progress on kicking his habit, took its toll. It got to the point where he could no longer drive and he had to depend on someone

else to take him to where he wanted to go. But Doc wouldn't refuse a call and someone was always willing to take him anywhere he had to go. He even hitchhiked.

He gave one man some pills. The man was afraid to take them but when he asked one of the doctors at the hospital about them, the doctor said, "I would have given you the same thing. You don't have to be afraid of Doc. He knows more about medicine than all of us here at the hospital put together."

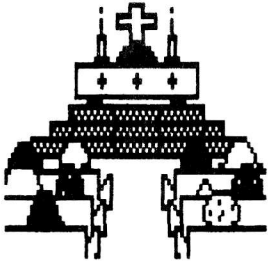
One morning, after a long hard night of trying to get some sleep, Doc started to get up and realized he couldn't. Then the Lord appeared and said, "Son, it's time to come home."

Doc said, "Lord, I'm not finished here yet. My patients in the hospital, and Lord, that family in the mountains, they've got a baby coming into this world and no money, who'll take care of them? And my two young boys and my wife, Lord, I ain't done much for them. Besides, Lord, I didn't get rid of that old habit like I promised."

The Lord answered, "Son, when I sent you here I knew you wouldn't last long for your habit became a sickness. You have done your job here. Someone will take care of your patients. Your wife and two young sons, they can be proud of you. I sent you here for a purpose; you have fulfilled it. You have been completely unselfish. Now come, you are sick and tired. I will give you rest."

Well, Doc became a legend in that country but they will never name a highway or a school after him. There will never be a monument built for him cause you see, Doc was one of the down to earth little people, unselfish and humble.

But you know, last night I had a dream. I was walking through those mountains and stumbled on that same old logging road that Doc had bounced over so many times in that old logging truck. And this is the truth, so help me, I pray. There was a big sign that said, 'Doc Odell Highway.'



## ANY DAY NOW

Driving down an old country road I noticed this old run-down church. I got out and looked around. Didn't look like it was being used any more. The door was standing open so I went in and sat down in the back. The pews were broken down, the roof had been leaking, and cobwebs were hanging from the ceiling. I

thought, what a shame after all the years it had given its people, and now has to end up like this.

I closed my eyes and, with a little imagination, I could hear an old time preacher and an old church hymn. I fell off to sleep and when I awoke, darkness was closing in. As I sat there rubbing my eyes I heard a noise at the door and, to my surprise, people were coming in. The strange thing about them is that they were dressed like people of many years ago.

Someone sat down beside me and I looked around. There was this old, gray-haired man with smiling blue eyes and a little spot of tobacco juice on his chin. "Hi," he says, with outstretched hand. "Glad to have you here. I helped build this church way over one hundred years ago. Hey, you look scared. Don't be. You see, we're all buried right outside there. Yes, that road runs over our graves. When they closed this church some years ago we started coming back for services. Yessir, this church has quite a history. General Lee stopped here on his way to Richmond.

"You'll enjoy our meeting today. See that preacher that just rode in and hitched his horse out back. We call him a circuit rider. Yessir, he preaches the Bible. The Book, I call it. Yessir, he preaches the Book. He comes through here about once a month. Now, we get kinda wild in our meetings. You know, Amens, shouting and all, you may not be used to that. See that lady in the third row from the front?

"That's my wife. Momma, I call her. She got me in here years ago, but she's never been able to get me to sit up front. 'Momma,' I says, 'I can't see what's going on up there. I want to sit in the back where I can see everybody.' See her cut her eye back here? I expect her to come back and haul me up there one of these times. Now, that young feller with her, and the pretty girl, that's our son and his wife. He lost his arm in the Civil War. We gave them some land and they started a family of their own.

"That man and woman right behind Momma, see the young lady and lad with them? That's their son and he's craz--uh, well, kinda teched, but he's God's own, he is, yes sir.

"Look at old Luke in the front row, see how mad he looks? He don't agree with anything the preacher says. Listen at him beat that cane on the floor. The louder the preacher, the madder he gets, and the harder he bangs that cane on the floor. It's a wonder if that preacher don't come down there and whup him good. But he gets real happy when they pass the collection plate. He loves to give, says he's not giving to the preacher anyway, but giving to the Lord.

"Hear old lady Bailey singing off key? Listen, hear it? Look at everybody with their ear cocked. They're listening to her sing off key, not listening to the song. If she wasn't singing it wouldn't be near as good. Amen!

"There's old John and his family of ten, travels a great distance to get here, yes sir, wouldn't miss a service for nothing. Son, its been a long time, but you know the Lord is coming any day now. That's right, any day now.

"You know, I look back to over a hundred years ago at these old time preachers. They were very important, son, they preached the Book. I've watched the people down through the years and they're all about the same. Each generation had people that didn't agree with the preacher, somebody that was a little teched and somebody that always sang off key. Some, like me, that liked to sit in the back.

"Oh, you've built bigger and better churches and that's alright, but one thing I can't understand. Each generation has pulled out some of these old sins, tried to dust them off, wash 'em, and begin to use them. The first thing you know, they don't call them sins any more. No sir, change, they call it.

"Well now, the Book don't change, stays the same, agree with me, lad? Amen. Say, you don't look too good, lad. Are you sick? Man, are you sweating. I guess betwixt me and this preacher, we have raked you over the coals. But it's true, ain't it, lad? Amen.

"Well, I guess it's about over, there's the closing prayer. Let's go outside, you need some air. Sure was nice sitting with you, lad. Let me give you a little advice. Them old sins you've been carrying around trying to use, they won't clean up. Throw them on the ground where they belong and start walking on them. You see, they were sins a hundred years ago and they're still sins. Change? No, no, don't you see? The Book doesn't change, stays the same, stays the same.

"Look, come back again. Yeah, do that. Me and you will wait till the last minute, when Mamma ain't looking and slip in and sit down in the back. I love to sit in the back, don't you?"

Then, as I headed for the car, he cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, "Don't forget lad, any day now, any day now."



## MY KIND OF STORE

Driving along the other day I spotted an old Prince Albert sign on the side of a shed. The metal was rusted and you could hardly read it anymore. It started me thinking about how you used to see them everywhere, especially on store fronts along with Bruton and Copenhagen Snuff, Wrigleys Gum, etc. When all the old stores went by with time, so did all the old signs.

Then I got to thinking about how much I miss the old stores, the kind I used to visit in Lee County, Virginia, forty or fifty years ago. They usually had a little porch with a couple of chairs and a few nail kegs to sit on. That's where the men congregated for their whittling and story-telling and discussing of the news from far and near.

You could learn almost as much from these men, if you would just listen close enough, as you could learn going to school or church. They could figure out a problem in their head faster than the almighty computer. Some of them knew more Bible than most of our preachers of today and, its for sure, they had a better understanding between right and wrong. To them you were either a good, morally decent man or you were just as mean as hell, no in-between. In

Winter, of course, meant the chairs and nail kegs were moved inside around a pot-bellied stove, which usually sat in the middle of the store. Let's go in there and see if we can refresh our memory about some of our long gone and, sometimes, forgotten past.

The first thing you noticed as you opened the door was the clanging of a small bell which seemed to give you a grand entry and a cheerful greeting from everyone inside. The second thing was the wonderful aroma of coffee, tobacco, candy, dry goods and a number of other things. There was also the smell of the oil used on the floor to keep the dust down. That aroma seemed to give the feeling of confidence, happiness, and general well-being.

On either side of the store there was a long counter that ran from the front to the back with an opening for the owner to pass back and forth. Sometimes there was a gate in the opening. No one else went behind the counter. You told him or her what you wanted and they brought it to you, which ain't a bad idea. If you pay for something why can't it be brought to you?

In the middle of the store stood the old pot-bellied, coal stove. During cold weather you would find at least a half dozen men gathered around that old coal stove, telling tall stories and discussing everything in general.

One store I especially remember had foodstuffs, tobacco, staples, etc. on one side and on the other side the shelves were stacked high with shoes, cloth, underwear, pots, pans, stove pipes, horse collars, horse shoes, and about anything else you wanted, that is, if they could find it. The counter on that side was usually stacked with bolts of cloth, mounds of overalls, gloves and knee-high heavy socks with red or green tops--these were turned down over knee-high boots which, I guess, was considered a fashion at that time.

This store did a good business, but nothing compared to what they do today. Of course, back in those days people raised most of their foodstuff. You could spend hours in there and maybe the biggest purchase you would see

would be a twenty-five pound bag of flour, a slab of cheese or, once in a while, someone would buy a chamber pot, or as we called them in that neck of the woods, a "slop jar."

The lady that owned this store had more business sense than two men put together. I can still see her today with that smiling face framed by that ever-present sunbonnet. I can remember my mother sending me to the store with a live hen or rooster to trade for something we needed. Many's the time I would raid the hen's nests at home and slip two eggs in my rear pocket to trade for a pack of Teaberry Gum or a bar of Baby Ruth candy. Then, when I started to smoke I would trade the two eggs for a bag of Bull Durham. When this dear lady would question me about it I would tell her it was for my dad. I don't think she really believed me and she would threaten to ask my parents, but she never did.

I will never forget the cold winter morning that I slipped one egg into each hip pocket and started off to school with intentions of stopping at the store for my Bull Durham. There was a thin sheet of ice which you couldn't see, that covered everything. I walked out of the house and as soon as I hit the top step my feet went out from under me and I slid down the four steps and halfway across the yard. There was just no way I could explain to my mother why I had broken eggs in both my pockets!

Well, that's my kind of store. A store with heart, with kindness; a store with tall tales and a store where they discussed religion openly and unashamedly. A store where the strongest drink you could buy was a NeHi Ginger Ale and, most of all, a store with a soul. I remember a few of the people who ran such stores--Joe Doss, Mary Lee Woodard, Clarence Woodard, Bradley and Aubra Dean, L. C. Martin and Jim Poe, Mr. Garrett and Mr. Day at Cranks Creek in Kentucky. I'm sure there were many others just like these.

I would like to turn back time on some cold winter day and walk into Woodard's store and see about six of these old timers sitting around that old stove. I would push my way in and warm my hands, remark about how cold it is outside, turn around, pull up my coattail and warm my rear, then push a bolt of cloth out of the way, hop up on the counter, drink my NeHi Orange pop and listen once again to these men talk of the state of the world and the change that's coming. They would always say, "and not all for the better." How right they were.

When the talking was over and they were all ready to leave, I'd stand at the door and shake each one's hand and tell them just how much they are missed. Then I'd watch them turn their coat collars up, bow their heads and walk away against the wind. It seems that's the way I always remember them; walking against the winds of change and not being able to do much about it.

So, I want to thank all the old storekeepers for running a store with heart and soul, with an old stove and nail kegs; a place where these old men of wisdom could meet to talk and discuss what Gabriel Heater said on the radio the night before.

So, thank you, Mr. Garrett at Cranks Creek and Mr. Day. Thank you, Uncle Lloyd Martin and Darling Jim. Thank you, Bradley and Aubra. Thank you, Clarence. You put a lot of miles on that old wheel chair. Must have been pure

misery having to sit in that thing all the time. But you always had a smile on your face and called all the little runny-nosed children by their names.

Thank you, Mary Lee. And thank you for all the prayers I heard you pray at Pine Grove Church. I think one of them caught up with me years later. Thank you for not telling my Mamma that I was trading her eggs for Bull Durham. Thank you all. You live on in my memories as some of the finest people that I will ever know.

Rest easy there in Lee Memorial Gardens or on a lonely hillside under a cedar tree because you ran a store with love and heart and soul. You wouldn't want to know them as they are today--air conditioned and cold. The reception you get is just about as cold as the air, too.

If, in your travels, you happen to see an old, rustic building with Prince Albert, Garrett Snuff and Clabber Girl Baking Power signs nailed to the front, some nail kegs and a kerosene pump on the porch; stop in, because there just might be one left somewhere. You know, souls do live on.

## DEWEY JOHN

Some called him John, others Dewey,  
John Dewey, and Dewey John.  
He had a crooked arm and a twisted leg,  
with his foot drawn down.  
He could do no harm, for he was a humble boy,  
and his body wasn't sound.  
Rickets left him frail and weak,  
as he struggled to live and play.  
The future for him looked mighty bleak,  
but he smiled anyway.  
I became his playmate and friend  
when no one else seemed to care.  
And, I tried not to pretend,  
when I'd tell him he was strong as a bear.  
"Me," he'd laugh.  
"You think I'm strong, why, I can't lift ten pound."  
"Now that's just in your mind Dewey John,  
and it won't be long until you're healthy and sound."  
We walked a ways to school, me and Dewey John,  
real slow, cause he was lame.  
He never learned much, but, Oh, God, he tried.  
He could never write his name.  
It was on a cold Fall morning, in Thirty-Nine, as I recall,  
and the leaves were turning brown.  
A Model A Ford went by with Dewey John;  
they had shot him to the ground.  
He was on a horse when they shot him,  
at the Bowman Holler sawmill.  
A misunderstanding among boys they said--  
and they didn't mean to kill.  
That night I couldn't sleep at all,  
finally got up and went outside.  
I cursed the stars, and dared them to fall.  
And then sat down and cried.  
I gazed into the heavens and asked the Lord Why, When,  
and How, and What for, Lord, did Dewey John have to die.  
More than forty years have gone by now,  
and the answer I have never found.  
Why, oh why, was a harmless cripple like Dewey John  
shot to the ground.  
My ways are different now.  
I no longer curse the falling stars,  
but still seek the answer, why.  
Forgive me, Oh, Lord, for I don't understand  
why Dewey John had to die.



## I SAT UP FRONT

I guess that if I had to pick out my most fondest memories, a number of them would be of Pine Grove Baptist Church in Lee County, Virginia. The old church, which has long since been torn down and replaced, sat right at the edge of an old dusty or muddy road, depending on the season.

I remember when I was eight to ten years old, I liked to hang around the men outside and listen to their stories before Sunday School started. They had a favorite gathering place about one hundred yards from the church just across a one-lane bridge. There you would find a dozen or more every Sunday morning, whittling, telling stories, trading knives, etc.

A few of them never darkened the door of the church in warm weather, preferring to sit on the logs and listen to the preacher through the open windows of the church.

They all wore hats set at a certain angle on their heads; some tilted to the right, some to the left, some on the back of their head, some down over the eyes and, once in a while, you would see somebody who preferred to wear it down over their ears. They would spend a great amount of time getting their hats at just the right angle and, if you wanted to get someone riled, just move that hat a little. It spoiled their whole day trying to get it back in place.

In dry weather, you could look in either direction on the old dusty road and know, long before it came into sight, when a car was approaching by the dust cloud it was raising. You could judge its speed, too, just by watching the dust.

I remember Steve Middleton was a young man then and he had a fast car. That's the only way he drove it, too, was fast. One Sunday morning some of us smaller boys were playing on the old, one-lane bridge a few feet from where the men were sitting. One of the men spotted a fast-moving cloud of dust coming down the road.

He yelled out, "Hey, you boys, get off that bridge. There's a cloud of dust moving mighty fast. It must be that young Steve Middleton."

We just got clear of the bridge as he roared across. Another of the men said, "Lord, would you look at that; they're going to have to cut him out of that car one of these days. He'll never make that curve at the Ed Evans place at the rate he's going."

Another one said, "What's this? Here he's coming back; get out of the way boys. How come he's coming back?"

"I told you he would never make that curve at Ed Evans," the other answered. "That boy will never live to be thirty years old driving like that."

"Yeah, I know," said another one. "Charlie Redmond said he was going to arrest him if he could ever catch him walking!"

The one incident that I will never forget though, happened when I was about twelve or thirteen years old. I went to prayer meeting on a Wednesday night with my cousin, Lynn. Neither of our parents attended that night so



seeing that they weren't there to watch us, we stayed outside with a few of the other boys. We thought that was more fun and we were a pretty mischievous bunch, always looking for something to amuse us.

It was in the fall of the year and the door of the old church was closed, but the latch hadn't caught, leaving the door cracked open about two inches. I took up a position looking through the crack at the girls inside. I had just bent over to get a better look down toward the front pews when I heard someone running behind me. Before I could straighten up that running something hit me with their bowed head, right in the middle of my back, with such force that at first I thought I had been hit by a billy goat.

The door exploded open and I went pitching, stomping the floor at the same time, trying to keep from pitching forward on my face. The floor was old wood boards coated with oil to keep the dust down, and I had on heavy winter shoes with toe taps and heel plates on them to make them last all year. The noise I made was unbelievable.

All the members present that night were on their knees praying because that's the way we done it in those days and, of course, the praying stopped when that door flew open.

I was halfway down the aisle and about to get my balance when I caught my toe in a leg of an old pot-bellied, coal burning stove. I started pitching forward again and, before I regained my balance, I was right at the front pew.

Every eye in the church was on me. There was nothing left to do but sit down.

It seemed like forever before they recovered and got the service going again. I sat there until they stood for the closing song and sneaked out.

My cousin, Lynn, was no where to be seen and the other boys out there were in tears from laughter. Of course, it was a dead giveaway as to who put me through the door by him not being present. It made me real mad at the time and, madder, that my cousin had done it to me.

I thought I would never live that down--even the church members would kid me about it for a long time after that. I have never sat that far up front since, except maybe for a funeral. I just don't care to sit up front in church.

Amanda Rhea, bless her heart, we called her Mandy, said that she had just prayed for the Lord to shake that church up. "And I thought that he had gone and done it, then I looked up and seen you," she said.

My cousin, Lynn, has a better version of the story than I have since he stood back and watched it all happen.

There's one more thing I would like to say. I decided a few years ago that if I seen some good in someone, I was going to say something about it. Since then I have found it very easy to do and it don't cost a penny and I feel a lot better that I said it.

I don't judge people by their wealth although I realize some folks do. I try to look at their good side and sometimes, you'd be surprised that you might discover something special about them.

My cousin volunteered for two wars and served well--and I'm sure if we

should get into another one he was able, he would be one of the first to ship out. He has that certain something that even he can't explain and I'm sure he can't understand why everybody don't feel the same way.

All through our country's history, from Pickett's Virginians, Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders and through the leadership of Pershing, MacArthur and a number of great and small, there has always been a select few that would bleed and die in the trenches while the rest of us slept. The known and unknown patriots are a select group that we should all salute.

My cousin, Lynn Burgin, stands among them.



## HE STANDS IN THE FRONT RANKS

He was born in East Tennessee in 1886, the same year the Statue of Liberty was erected. The Hatfield-McCoy feud finally ended in 1888. Dwight L. Moody died in 1889 and Billy Sunday came along to fill the void. The first electric power station was built four years before his birth.

When he was four years old, Sitting Bull was killed and hostilities ended at Wounded Knee. Montana was admitted to the Union in 1889. He was twelve years old during the Spanish-American War.

He came to Lee County, Virginia, in 1906 with an axe in his hands, to join his older brother Jack, who was the ramrod of one of the biggest timber cutting expeditions that the hills and hollers around Pennington Gap would ever see again. Teddy Roosevelt was President. At the time, Mountain Laurel grew along the streams and hung along the banks of the wagon roads.

Almost everything moved by rail. The hollers became filled with activity and excitement as track was laid for the small Dinky Trains to haul the logs to Stone Creek and Pennington Gap. Later, during the Great Flu Epidemic of 1918-19, these same Dinky Trains hauled the dead and were used to help in any way they could.

It was a day and time that I have always longed for; when things and people were more simple and, more important, honest. A time in history when a man's word and a handshake was worth more than all the deeds and documents that can be stuffed in the Jonesville courthouse.

He saw the birth of the Tin Lizzie in 1908. Six years later, Henry Ford started mass production, paying his workers \$5.00 per day. He was working for \$1.00 or \$2.00 per day at the most, for 10-hour days.

At the age of 26 in 1912, he took as his bride pretty Ida Harber, daughter of John Harber, who lived near Pine Grove Church. That was the year the Titanic sunk and the "Big Train" Walter Johnson was pitching for the Washington Senators. New Mexico and Arizona were admitted to the Union.

In 1914 he held his first-born, a son, the oldest of eight children. He cleared his rocky hillside land and made it into a decent little farm with a fine apple orchard.

He used his own natural instinct to do things and didn't rely on what someone else said. Which in my mind is our biggest weakness today; we have to check with the extension service before we plant or watch television to see when its going to rain. The highly paid weatherman usually doesn't know until he sees it coming over a distant hill. You may as well call your dog in and see if he is wet.

When he was 50 years old he was digging coal above St. Charles, at Benedict Coal Company. Back-breaking work in the 1930's for they didn't have any of the modern machinery that we have today.

Along about 1936, when I was ten years old, he would walk past our house on Sunday mornings on his way to Pine Grove Church with his head held high and

that ever-present pipe that he stuffed with the strongest tobacco that he could find. He walked erect and brisk like a soldier but, to my knowledge, he was never a soldier in anybody's army.

But now that I have had time to think about it I can see that he was a soldier who lived strictly by the rules of our Master's Great Book, the Bible, and never allowed change or the pull of evil to alter his course. He only sought what it took to raise a family and nothing more.

It was on one of these Sunday mornings, I waited for him and fell into step beside him and tried to keep time to his quick, short steps. Although I was only a kid he would talk to me as if I were a grown man, and that made me feel important.

We turned off the main road at Woodard's Store and took the Elys Creek Road to Pine Grove. The dust was at least an inch thick on the road and if a car happened to go by, you couldn't see nothing till the dust settled. There was pokeberry bushes growing along the road loaded with berries. My parents and about everyone else I knew had always told me never to eat these berries, not even one, for if you do, you will be dead before morning. They're poison.

I will never forget how shocked I was when he walked over to a pokeberry bush that was hanging over a fence into the road, picked a half dozen of the berries, blew the dust off and began to pop them into his mouth. He ate them like peanuts! I guess he saw the shocked look on my face. He smiled and said, "A few of them won't hurt you. In fact, they're good for you. They have iodine in them and that will kill worms in your belly."

But that didn't convince me and I was sure he was going to die. Maybe sometime during the church service that day or, if not, shortly after he got home. But he didn't die and I watched as the days and weeks went by thinking that one day I would hear of his death from the poison pokeberries.

In 1938, his oldest son came home from the mines complaining of a headache and his neck getting stiff. Within two days the doctor had diagnosed it as meningitis and quarantined the whole family to their home with no contact with other people whatsoever. The only person to enter their home during that time of their son's wild suffering was the doctor.

The neighbors had to get everything they needed from the store and set it outside the house for them to pick up. I remember the neighbors would build a bonfire down hill from the house and stay there all night just to be near their sorrow. He would come out on the porch through the night and call out the progress of his son, which grew steadily worse.

Finally, after just a few days, the son he had held and caressed 24 years earlier, he now had to help hold in the bed to die. He stayed strong through it all.

Some years later he would sit all night at his mother's death bed. I will never forget the sadness in his soft voice when he opened the door to a room next to hers, where I was sitting with one of his other sons, and said, "Ma's gone."

He was always ready to help his neighbors in any way he could. When someone died, he and one other man, Finley Napier, would be the first ones to

show up to help dig the grave. He went on his way, doing what he thought was right, trying to impress no one with 'Look at what I am doing and how good I am.' Anyone who made his acquaintance knew this man was genuine.

His youngest son told me after his death, "My father read the Bible and prayed daily at home and, it was only after I grew up that I began to understand his ways, and what a fine man he was. I am so proud that he was my father and I hope that I can live my life as he lived his."

But the shining example of this man's goodness and honesty came when he was near 80 years old. At a time when he could have used the money from Miner's Black Lung benefits, he filled out the papers and, because of his lack of time or years worked in the mines before or after certain dates, he didn't qualify. When they changed the dates so he could qualify and asked him to sign, he pushed the papers back across the desk and said, "No, I can't sign that 'cause that would be telling a lie. If that's what it takes, I don't want the money." To me, that's a mark of a real man. He didn't sell his soul for a few pieces of silver.

He died in 1978 at the age of 92, forty-two years after I saw him eat the pokeberries. I guess you could say they finally killed him.

I told you this story because we in Lee County and in this country, owe this man and many others like him, so much. We forget, or seem to care so little, about how much hard work men like him put into opening and settling our country. Their lives were tempered with hard work, coal shovels, axe handles, plows and muddy wagon roads. They seemed to have a different view on life, especially morals. I wish we were more like that today.

This man was not widely known outside his own community and he enjoyed no prestige or ever attained anything of great material value simply because he placed his values elsewhere. As I said before, he was never a soldier in any man's army but, if there be such a thing as an army of good and decent men, you will find Charlie Rhea right up in the front ranks. He earned his place there.

## WATCHING THE CARS GO BY



Looking back over my life, I think of all the people I have known and how I have had to overcome fear of some of them. I remember, especially, my first year at Pine Grove school in Lee County, Virginia.

I would get sick headaches just about every day and many times the teacher would let me go home. I had to walk quite a distance and a few times I would have to stop and lay down in the shade before I could make it all the way home. Looking back, I think it was my fear of the other children that caused me to be highly nervous and brought on the sick headaches.

On the way to and from school some of us had to pass this house where an old man, that some of the older boys had managed to make into an enemy, lived. One of the many things they did to him was throw rocks, which damaged the tree limbs, into his apple trees. It got to the point where he would watch whenever any of us boys passed his house.

After I saw him come to the road and give the boys a tongue-lashings a few times, I became deathly afraid of him. It was always a relief to get past that house. But one day when the teacher sent me home with one of my sick headaches, I stopped at a spring that ran out of the rocky road bank directly in front of the man's house.

After getting a drink of water I felt like I just had to lay down awhile before I could make it on home. Not seeing anyone at the house, I laid down and closed my eyes. I don't know how long I had been laying there, in and out of sleep, when I opened my eyes to see this man standing over me.

He looked at me for what seemed like forever; but I'm sure it wasn't for long, it was just that I was so afraid of him. Finally, he reached down and helped me to my feet. He held me steady across a foot-bridge to his house. He sat me in the shade on the porch and went into the house and brought his wife out. She put a cool, wet cloth on my face and head.

After a bit, I felt much better but they wouldn't let me leave until they were sure I could make it on home. After that, I was never afraid of that man again. I understood that he would only tongue-lash you when you needed it. If you stayed in your place you would get no trouble from him.

Some years later, when I was ten or eleven years old, I had this same fear, if not worse, of another man. The expression on his face never changed. He never smiled, let alone laugh. He carried a big revolver in the hip pocket of his overalls everywhere he went. You could clearly see the bulge of that big pistol. Needless to say, everyone gave him plenty of room and didn't mess with him. I hated to meet him on the road and, if I did, couldn't wait till he got out of sight. For some reason I had always feared he might pull that hog-leg and shoot.

One day I was on the way to the store, about a half-mile from our house, walking on an old wagon road above the creek in order to stay out of the mud on



the road. At that time the road was almost impassable. I doubt if you could have driven a car from the mouth of Stone Creek to the Kentucky line without getting stuck.

I was almost to the store when a nature pain hit me so I did just what came natural in those days; I grabbed a handful of leaves and got upon a stump. I could see the old muddy road through the trees and brush. I wasn't worried about anyone seeing me from the road. I could have occupied that stump the rest of the day and never seen the first car.

At about the middle of my relief, I heard someone walking in the leaves behind me on the old wagon road. I looked around and, of all people, it was that deadly pistol-packing man. He had come to a stop and was staring at me. Finally, with the expression on his face never changing, growled, "What are you doing?"

To this day I don't know how I said anything, as scared as I was, but somehow I blurted out, "Watching the cars go by." He stood there staring at me for what seemed like forever. There I was squatted on that stump with my naked rear end facing him and my head turned looking at him over my shoulder. I was hoping the expression on his face would change or, better yet, he would just decide to go away. I didn't dare move for fear he would pull that pistol and blow that stump from under me. He clearly had caught me with my britches down!

Then, all of a sudden, his expression did change. At first there was a trace of a smile, then came a low moaning sound as he pranced around in the leaves. Then, all at once, he jumped high in the air and yelled. He acted just like you would expect a person to act that had fallen asleep and woke up in heaven. He was hollering and laughing.

He finally went on his way and, after he was long out of sight, I could still hear him yelling and laughing. It goes without saying that I was relieved in more ways than one.

Every time I saw that man after that, never mind where it was, or who I was with, he would walk up and ask me what I was doing. And, of course, my answer would be, "Watching the cars go by." That would set him off and he would go away laughing. No one could ever understand how I could make this solemn man go away laughing.

I never told them the story and, as far as I know, he didn't either. I was never afraid of him after that. As long as I knew him the only thing he ever did with that oversized pistol was plug a hole in an empty sardine can for practice.

I guess I like to bring a little message with my stories so I won't let this one be an exception. I think my message would be that I can handle someone that kinda explodes and gives me a tongue lashing, when I've got it coming, and its for sure I have learned never to make a gun-toter mad. I try to do something to make him laugh and that way you have a friend for life.

There is one kind of person though, that I don't know how to handle. That's the person that talks behind your back, backbiters, some people call them. It seems to be jealousy or, sometimes, hate that sets them off.

I have picked up bits and pieces of things said about me through the

years and, in my case, I think they classify me as an uneducated fool. Well, there is one thing worse and that's an educated fool--someone educated far beyond their intelligence.

I guess the last straw was when I heard that I write and talk about people that nobody knows. Well, me and a few others know them and that's all that counts. I don't deal in doctors, lawyers and Indian Chiefs. So I will keep my distance from this kind of person for two reasons: Number One, I am just plain scared to death of them and Number Two, I wouldn't want to taint them with any of my down-to-earth uneducated humbleness. That would never do. It might cause them to say something good about someone or push that old cloud of whatever it is that they have been carrying around for so long out of the way.

I will borrow a phrase from one of my aunts and say, "I love you anyway." You will be in my thoughts the very next time I grab a handful of leaves and climb upon a stump 'to watch the cars go by.' That I promise.

## THE OLD PEDDLER

I passed a produce stand the other day and it reminded me of the peddlers I used to see when I was a kid. I miss them.

One comes to mind; his name was Bart. He cut the back of his old car off and made it look like a truck. From there he was in business: milk pails filled the running boards, baskets of beans, tomatoes, apples, butter, peaches; whatever was in season at the time. You name it and Bart peddled it.

Market prices? He didn't have no market prices; he just bartered with people and got whatever he could out of it. Freshness? No, he didn't claim to have anything fresh. He would just put the best looking stuff on top.

I remember when peaches would be in season he would manage to get some at a bargain somewhere. Somebody would ask, "How much your peaches, Bart?"

He would roll his cigarette from one side of his mouth to the other and say, "Well, you're in luck, good prices, two dollars a bushel." But as soon as they started moving the ones on top to have a better look, he would come down to a dollar and a half.

Right down the road from where I was raised was Woodards Store--owned and operated by Mary Lee Woodard. It was like a general store. She carried about anything that you wanted, that is if she could ever find it. Along with running the store with the help of her husband and children, she peddled vegetables, chickens, milk and butter from the small farm that they owned.

They had an old Chevrolet car that her daughter, Edith, drove after the boys married and moved away. They would load that old car down once a week and cross the mountain into Kentucky and peddle it all out around the coal camps.

Edith met a young man that would later become her husband on one of those peddling trips into Kentucky. She brought him back to Virginia and they settled down and raised a family.

I can hear it now, the sales pitch, cutting through the noise and dust of the coal camps:

Sweet milk, buttermilk, good butter too,  
Tomatos, potatoes, corn and beans, all fresh to you.  
Onions and cabbage, a good firm head,  
Dominecker chickens, all corn fed.  
Molasses, apple butter and blackberry jam,  
Chow-Chow, sausage and sugar cured ham.  
Hurry up and get it loaded on that old Chevrolet,  
Tie some roasting ears on top and let's be on our way.  
Across Little Black, Big Black and on down to Crummies Creek,  
Where the miners expect us at least once a week.  
Everything's fresh and our prices are right,  
Lets get an early start and get back before night,  
Cause there's things to be done, milking to do,  
Now, Edith, you drive careful, I'm depending on you.

Across Black Mountain in that old Chevrolet,  
To Crummies, Mary Helen and other camps along the way.  
Prices are right, never be this cheap again.  
Milk, fifteen cents a gallon,  
Ten cents a pound for a cooking hen.  
Got a few tomatos left, going real cheap,  
So we'll head back to Virginia,  
See you next week.



## HE WORKS THE GARDENS OF HEAVEN

At about the age of eleven or twelve years I hoed corn with my Grandpa Kirk. He paid me twenty-five cents a day. I can still see him fishing a quarter out of that old pocket change purse that everybody carried in those days.

I worked with him off and on for three or four years. He was a hard worker and wanted everything done just right. He had a way of getting the work out of you, too. By the time I was thirteen he put me in the lead row and was pushing me. And he would always brag on me to someone, as to what a good worker I was. Boy, that really put me in gear.

He could hoe the best looking row of corn I ever seen. He wanted lots of fresh dirt brought up around the corn--and how he could find it in some of those old rocky fields was a mystery to me. I was bad to let my hoe slip on a rock or something and cut down a stalk of corn, especially when we were working it the first time and it was small.

As we worked we could hear cow bells in nearby fields and off on another hillside you could hear someone plowing. And in the Spring you most likely could smell wood burning from someone clearing off what they called New Ground.

I used to listen to the men plowing, they all had their way of saying 'Gee' and 'Haw', 'Whoa' and 'Gedup.' The way some of them said these simple words was beyond me and I never could catch what they meant and I'm sure the horses and mules didn't either. Some of them sounded like they were singing a song.

And if the animal didn't mind, or happened to step on the corn, they had language that was unprintable. I would be listening to these sounds and Grandpa would say, "Now we're gonna have to speed it up a little, son. We want to get done today if we can. Pull plenty of dirt around the corn and be sure to cut the weeds, don't cover any of them up. Wait, what's this, did you cut this stalk down?"

"No, no, Granpa, I seen it there, it must have been a grub worm or something."

"Now you must be careful, son. That only leaves one stalk in that hill." He had seen it before I found enough dirt to cover it up.

"And here's some weeds you missed. You covered them up. Now, be a little more careful. Are you coming to Sunday School and church service, Sunday?"

"Yes, Granpa, I'll be there."

Grandpa was concerned for his family and friends and neighbors. And concerned as much for their soul as he was for their body. He loved Pine Grove church and lots of times he would walk from the mouth of Stone Creek to church, a distance of about four miles.

"Now son, after Sunday School don't go out and sit on the hill. Stay inside for the service." Then he'd say, "Boy, that Preacher Green's a good



one, ain't he?"

"Yes, Granpa." I would answer.

"Well, we've finally finished this row. Cut the weeds all the way up to the fence now. Right there's one you missed."

"That one's on the other side of the fence, Granpa."

"Well, its sticking through on this side, so reach across and cut it down. Now, let's go down to the Buddy Hole and get a drink of that good water. I hear the frogs jumping in, guess we'll have to wait till it clears up, Son."

If we were working in the Coal Bank field or anywhere nearby, we drank water from the Buddy Hole at the foot of the Coal Bank field. I wonder how it ever got that name. I never heard anybody say.

We shared the water with the frogs and snakes. You could hear the frogs jumping in before you got there and then you would have to wait for the water to clear up from where they had muddied it up.

Granpa would dip the old gourd in, take a drink and swear that it was the coldest water around. It had to be at least eighty degrees, but he was right, it was as cold as you would find anywhere because nobody around owned an ice box. He would take a long drink from the gourd and say, "Let's get back to work. I feel like I can get some work done now, don't you?"

"Yes, Granpa."

Yes, he was a hard working, concerned man; and misunderstood by many. I think he was a frustrated man and it showed at times. Like many others that were born in his time, almost with an axe or hoe in their hands from birth, he made his living from the land and that he could do well. He watched the birth of the automobile and automation literally pass him by.

I can identify with that today because computers and other inventions of my own time are leaving me standing still; snarling, grumbling and helpless. Change for the better? I don't know. One thing I do know, though, something's being lost along the way. His generation was much better than mine. We're losing our morality and humility as time goes on.

Just as long as he was able and could wrap his old crooked fingers around a hoe handle he raised a little garden and attended church. I thank the Lord that the day he walked up to the Pearly Gates he wasn't judged by the material things that he never attained here on this earth. He was let in for his faithfulness to his Lord.

He gained and left no material things down here, except for maybe an old pocket watch, a knife, a change purse and an old wore out hoe. But his work and actions earned him the right to walk the Gardens of Heaven with the Lord.

I'm proud that I hoed corn with my Grandpa. With each passing day, I grow prouder.





## HE DESERVED BETTER

He came from a large family in a coal camp above St. Charles, Virginia. He started playing baseball as a young man and became one of the best left-handed pitchers in the semi-pro Lonesome Pine League. I never saw him play, but the stories I have heard about him over the years etched him in my mind as a legend every bit as much as is the great Ty Cobb.

He played for the Knoxville Smokies, in organized ball and on other teams and in other places that I can't recall. I don't know if any of the following stories are true but here are a few that I've heard over the years.

It is said that he pitched an exhibition game against the Yankees in organized ball and lost by a score of one to nothing. Babe Ruth was supposed to have said he was the best left-hander he had ever hit against. If that story checks out as true the following should be added to his grave marker, 'Pitched against the Yankees and Babe Ruth.'

They say he went to spring training with a major league club; the Red Sox, I believe. While there he and another player went AWOL and spent a few days having fun in Cuba; when they returned they were released. I do not remember when he played his last game or on what league or team. But I remember the first time I ever talked to him.

It was in the late 1940's in a smoke filled pool room in St. Charles. He was dressed as most of the miners did back then; clean denim overalls, jacket and felt hat. He was a tall, raw-boned man, at this time out of baseball and working the coal mines trying to raise a family.

We shot a game of pool and with the cue ball he showed me how he held the ball on different pitches. I noticed the cue ball could disappear in the big left hand. I wish now that I had asked him about the stories that I had heard. I did ask him if he missed baseball. "Naw," he answered, as he looked away, "I could start back anytime I want to. The Atlanta Crackers send me a contract every spring; all I gotta do is sign it." I could tell he was just trying to hang onto the past. He was still living the dream, or what could have been...

In my time I have seen Willie Mays charge a hit to center in Wrigley Field on a slow runner and darn near throw him out at first base. I saw Sam Snead shoot a golf shot around a tree and whistle a tune as he walked down the fairway as if it was all routine. I saw Karl Wallenda walk a high wire in a strong wind--scary stuff! I saw Richard Petty ride inches from the wall at Daytona to win the 500.

I will always remember these things but they are not etched in my memory like the baseball players in Lee County, Virginia. These are just a few of many...the steady play of Buford Rhea, the quickness of "Pee Wee" Herndon in the infield and he could go like the wind on the base paths. (Sorry I can't remember his first name, we always called him "Pee Wee" and that's what I remember.) The smart crafty pitching of Rudolph "Rudy" Parsons. The sinker ball of Grant Seals. Big Bill Halstead could hit the ball out of sight in

Leeman Field; at that time the World's Largest Ball Park!

All of these things stir my memories but none as much as the coal miner that went right to the top, walked in, looked around and turned away for whatever reason. Maybe it was just too much success for a simple, fun-loving young man from the coal fields of St. Charles, Virginia. Or could it be that he chose to give it all up to come back to the hills among friends and family.

If Lee County should ever have a sports hall of fame he should be the first to go in. I will always treasure that day back there in St. Charles when I shot a game of pool with Hobert "Lefty" Scott. There was no mention of his baseball career in his obituary and that is sad. He deserved better.

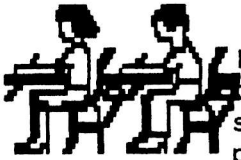
## HUMBLE BONES

Pretty red roses, violets of blue, lilacs of purple,  
Carnations and poppys, too.  
With wire and crepe paper, they'd fashion a pretty rose.  
How many those bony fingers made, I guess no one knows.  
My thoughts go back to the 'Thirties and 'Forties,  
And let me tell you, if I may,  
Of these two simple, humble people who sold flowers along the way.  
They walked all over Lee County and into Kentucky, too,  
Selling their pretty red roses, poppys and violets of blue.  
Nobody knows how far they walked, maybe twenty miles a day.  
With their loads of pretty crepe paper flowers for Decoration Day.  
They asked no one for favors as they trudged from door to door,  
Selling flowers for a living; they asked for nothing more.  
Does anyone ever remember them or know where they lay?  
Will there be pretty flowers on their graves this Decoration Day?  
Wouldn't it be nice if someone would plant a rosebush or two,  
Some purple lilacs and poppys, some pretty violets of blue.  
Then build a pretty white fence around these humble bones,  
And hang a little sign up on the gate,  
"In Memory of Bill and Lula Jones."

I got to thinking of these two good people this past Memorial Day, 1979.  
I used to see them on the road all the time. I think they sold flowers the  
year round.

I just wonder if they're still living. They must have passed on; seemed  
like they were old back then. But if they're not, I apologize for not knowing.  
If either one of them is still living, or both of them, give them flowers while  
they're living, for they deserve them.

## HORSE SHIRT BATTLE



It happened back in the 'Thirties when I was attending the old two-room Pine Grove School in Lee County, Virginia. Above the school there was a pasture and, at the time, it was being used to pasture five or six horses.

On up, on top of the hill where it leveled off, there was an old cemetery. The cemetery was fenced in to keep the horses out. But somebody or something, had tore part of the fence down and the horses got in and messed up the place.

So one day some of the older boys at school decided to go up there at morning recess. And, of course, us younger ones, being curious as boys are, tagged along with them.

Now they went up there with intentions of doing a good deed. Somebody had fixed the fence but the cemetery was filled with horse manure. They intended to clean out the horse manure.

So we got there and they looked it over and decided that, since there had been a hard freeze the night before, we should have no trouble picking up the horse manure with our hands and tossing it back across the fence. It was real easy because the stuff was froze as hard as a rock. I'm sure that we would have had it cleaned out within a few minutes but it didn't take long for one of the older boys to get an idea. And the first thing you know we were in a big manure fight, or whatever you want to call it.

As the battle went along, we chose up sides and gathered up piles of the stuff and got behind the tombstones. We went at it hot and heavy. Some of the older boys were strong and could throw hard. They could pop you with one of them frozen missile and just about lay you low if it hit you in the right place.

Well this went on and we started yelling and the horse manure was flying in all directions. We forgot all about the time and didn't hear the school bell ring. All of a sudden we heard someone hollering at the top of their voice. Behold, we looked up and there was the teacher.

I don't know how long he had been standing there watching. He said, "What on earth are you boys doing?"

We were standing there embarrassed and squirming. He stood there looking at us for awhile and finally said, "Well, let's go."

We didn't have much to say the rest of the day because he told us he wanted to see us all after school and he had a reputation for being tough. We were worried to say the least.

After school let out, he stood there before us. He rocked back and forth. He had a big long paddle in his hand that he kept slapping on the side of his leg. "Well," he said, "I don't know exactly how to punish you boys for this."

One of the older boys, seeing that the teacher was kinda undecided, thought that we might have a chance to get out of it. He said, "Well, Teacher,

we didn't do anything that was bad. Actually it was nothing." Boy, that really teed him off.

"Nothing, you say. You call that nothing?"

"Well," the boy said, "We didn't do no harm so I don't think we did anything."

By this time the teacher was all red in the face and was beginning to yell. "Didn't do anything, you say. Do you call throwing"--and here his tongue got all twisted up--"horse shi...horse sh...horse shirt, er, horse manure, nothing?"

I thought maybe we would get out of it anyway but some of the boys started to giggle. He finally got us quieted down. Then he said, "Now, I want everyone of you to bring a sack with you tomorrow."

"What for?" one of the boys asked.

"Because you boys are going to clean up that cemetery tomorrow. So don't forget, I want ever last one of you to bring a sack."

"What kind of sack?" someone asked. "A grass sack?" You see, that is what we called a burlap bag in that part of the country.

"A grass sack," he yelled. "What kind of a sack is a grass sack?" Well, he was getting more and more frustrated. Finally he said, "Just bring a bag, forget the sack and bring a bag."

Then one of the boys asked what kind of a bag. "What do you mean, what kind of a bag? Just a brown paper bag," he said. "You get groceries in it at the store. Don't you know what a bag is?"

Then one of the boys said, "Oh, you mean a poke."

"POKE!" He yelled. "Whoever told you that a bag is a poke?" By then he was good and mad. To cap it off one of the boys asked him if he had ever heard of a pig in a poke.

He sent us on home and the next morning we all came in with our brown bags, or pokes, whichever you prefer. He marched us up to the cemetery. He let the whole school come and watch.

Trouble is, it had warmed up and rained the night before and that horse manure was no longer hard and easy to handle. It was all soft and gooey, and we had to pick it up with our hands. We'd get a bag full and pour it across the fence, then go back and pick up some more.

The whole school, girls and all, were watching and they began to giggle. You know how girls are. Some of the older boys, they had girl friends and they were in the crowd. You know how embarrassing that can be?

We finally got it cleaned up and went to the creek and washed our hands.

I'll tell you one thing. We stayed away from that cemetery after that. Some time later, that teacher cooled off enough to see the comedy of it all. He said he had heard us yelling up there and when he looked he seen all that horse manure flying through the air and he thought we were being attacked by buzzards or something.

I wonder if any of the other old boys remember this? Would they admit it if they do?

I think we all deserve medals for participating in this great battle. I

have often wondered if any of the other guys suffered any side effects from this battle...like, agent oats, horse manure fever, etc. Something has been bad wrong with me ever since that day.

If that teacher would only step forward and verify this story, maybe than we could all get our medals and see if there is a program that will cover our ills from that battle. If not, I'm sure Congress will create one.





## THE TREE, AGAIN

Hello out there; this is the tree again. Its been about four years since I've talked to you. Lots of things have happened since then. We're coming along with our clinic and the fire department is shaping up real well. They're trying to bring some life back to this old town with the coal processing plants and a few other things.

But I don't think we will ever see it like it once was. How could you ever replace our old timers? Some of them passed on long ago and the rest are slowly dying out. Yes, I'm afraid the best of us are buried yonder in Lee Memorial Park; or on some lonely hillside under a cedar tree--or we soon will be.

Its been especially sad for me this month of May, nineteen eighty-two, cause I looked forward to George L. Kirk tearing up through here in that little car on his way to work every morning. He was an inspiration to me and I miss him something awful.

Guess I just took it for granted that he would live forever. But I take comfort in what the pastor said.

"This is just graduation day for our dear friend, George. He stood the test of time and troubles on this earth and passed on to his rewards."

And Brother "Dub" said it was a happy day for the Lord when he could call one of his own children home. Now, that's something to think about. Makes a lot of sense to me.

Old "George Washington" is still around and "Crips", out yonder in a nursing home. But some of them are gone forever. Like Sam Sharp said the other day, "We sure do miss old Mainline."

Well, like I said, the month of May has been bad for me and I ain't been feeling up to snuff myself lately. Just took the sap right out of me. I'm mighty tired and weary and sometimes I wonder if the end is about near for me.

And I can't keep from being sad every morning when George don't come tearing up through here in that little car. But I take heart in what Brother Dub Henderson said, so I'm gonna do the very best I can. When that day comes for me I want them to play the organ softly just for a few minutes, then make the announcement that I graduated with good marks and went on.

So keep that old faded flag flying underneath me and, if any of you old timers come this way, stop and talk to me awhile. It may not be long till we're all buried out yonder. But take heart, we can all come back again.

## STONE FACE

I'm just a rock. Somehow I took on human features; I can't help that.  
I'm perched here above a road in Lee County, Virginia.

Long ago, someone named me.

I've seen many generations go through this gap and rugged mountain pass.  
Wagon loads of coal and logs from the virgin forest, sweating men, tired animals, broken wagon wheels.

Then a railroad cut right through me. Since then, thousands of tons of the black gold has rode through me on the old rumblin' L & N.

I've been loved and respected by the people here and we've been bound by my ruggedness and their hard way of life.

A town sprang up close by and is partly named after this Gap. Through the years it has grown and prospered.

A few years ago, the Federal Government decided that they should tell us what to name, and rename--like, and dislike.

Rename it, they said.

So, they haggled around with this name and that. They decided to call me Indian Head. But somebody up in Washington put a stop to that name, too. So they finally settled on Stone Face Rock.

Now, ain't that something. Someone named me near two hundred year ago. A name that I got used to and liked. Who in the wide world would want to be called Stone Face?

There's lots of names that would be more suitable for me. Like Miners' Memorial Rock. Now, what's wrong with that?

Now, somebody comes along and makes a record about me. Right there on the label it says, Stone Face Rock, and with a rock beat. Can you imagine that? A big clumsy thing like me with a rock beat.

Wonder who wrote that song? Couldn't be anyone from around here.

Out of state cars will park down there at the road. People will get out and point up here and say, Old Stone Face--makes me so mad.

Old timers pass through here; they'll always look up at me. I can see their lips form the words. I know what they call me. If they'd look close they could see me smile 'cause that name means something.

There used to be a fireman on the old steam engine. He would stand and salute me every time he passed through.

Now, I'll tell you what they used to call me. No, I'd better not 'cause they'd be out here serving papers on me.

Now I got my rights, too. Maybe I'll get that ACLU, ULC, or CLU, whatever the heck it is, to represent me. They seem to want to represent everything else.

I'm afraid I'm going to lose my temper one of these days; pull up one of these scrub oaks and mop up around here. Or shake some rocks loose and block that road.

Old Stone Face -- makes me mad. Call me by my name, hear me?

Nobody asked me if they could change it. I've got my rights, too, you hear? I'm sick of it and I ain't gonna pose for no more pictures until you start calling me by my real name again. You hear me, you Dago, you Pollack, you Mex, you Hymie, you Lymie, you Bosh, you Washington Bureaucrat. Do you hear me, you Hillbilly?

Call me by my real name!

## GOOD MAN

I have known a lot of men in my time but the one I will tell you about now was one of the most optimistic men that I have ever known. Let's just say it was faith; no matter how dark the cloud he could always see the silver lining.

He gave me a job when I was a scared, skinny kid and from that day on he tried to instill in me the faith that I didn't have in myself. He was a credit to his community and a tireless worker for his church.

When a coal company went broke and the miners had run up large grocery bills with no way to pay, I've seen him burn their charge pads and say, "Paid in Full."

Some of these same men came back and got credit again after getting back on their feet because he still had faith in them. No medals are handed out for this kind of thing and that's a shame, but his rewards are coming.

I like to remember him when his health was better back in the 1940's. He would reach in the cooler for his half finished Coke and we would share a laugh about Lil' Abner in the evening paper. Or see him headed for P & P Wholesale Grocery in the mornings and stop at the icehouse for a supply of ice cream and chat with the Smally brothers.

Or, late in the evening, see him coming back from supper with a slight limp and stop to join in a horse shoe game. After closing the store, practice a while with the Admant Quartet.

He loved to fish and enjoyed a baseball game. And somehow, I find it hard to understand why he couldn't have stayed a little longer and enjoyed these things.

I will be forever grateful to him for giving me that job that meant so much to me and that large family of mine. But the sad part of it is, I never told him. I always meant to.

I'm not that skinny kid anymore but I'm still scared and without the faith I need. He's gone now but I can still feel his presence. Sometimes now, when things look hopeless for me and I'm standing on the edge of darkness, I feel a nudge from him reminding me that sunrise is just a few hours away.

I don't know if Stone Creek is a better community because he was there but it should be. And I don't know if I'm a better person for having known him but I ought to be.

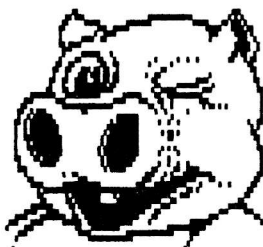
In his last days in the hospital, when he could no longer talk, he gave members of his family notes saying that he wanted to go on and be in Heaven.

Now, that's faith.

I guess I've said all these things to say this. He was a good man and I will never see the likes of him again because that kind only comes along once in a lifetime.

Lloyd C. Martin, 1911 - 1980.

He just stepped out in the Valley of the Sun to catch a breath of fresh air.



## MASTER MIND OF PRANKS

I attended elementary school with him at Pine Grove School in Lee County, Virginia. At first he was strictly business, a straight A student, and no tomfoolery.

As time went on though, he acquired the knack for masterminding pranks along with his straight A's. He always seemed to be able to involve other people to help him with his schemes to play mischievous, and usually harmless, pranks. Some of the more memorable ones happened when we were young men in our twenties. Some I participated in and some I just heard about.

I remember one Halloween night when about a dozen of us took a man's hay rake from his field and pulled it by hand by his house. The plan was to be real quiet till we got by the house but that was hard to do because of the iron wheels on the rake.

Just as we got even with the house some of the boys started yelling out his name and telling him what we were doing. I guess that was their way of making it a little more exciting. Lucky for us that the ones pulling the rake broke into a run and we quickly disappeared down the road in the dark because we discovered a little while later that he had armed himself with a shotgun.

We pulled the old rake about a mile down the road, disturbing everyone along the way with our yelling and the clanging of the iron wheels. Our plan was to leave it somewhere undamaged so the man could find it later. So we parked it on a bridge that crossed a creek to another man's house.

About that time another one of our gang came by in his car and we told him what we had done. He suggested that we should ride up by the man's house to see how he was reacting to his disappearing hay rake. We all piled in the car--at least six of us in the back seat.

Just before we got to his house the headlights showed someone standing on the store porch that was just down the road from his house. The boy driving pulled alongside the store and stopped. We could clearly see that it was him standing there with his overcoat collar turned up, his hat pulled down over his eyes and, as he started walking toward us, the shotgun in his hands.

He came over to the driver and asked him if he seen a car down the road somewhere pulling a hay rake. "Some boys took my hay rake," he said. "I know they will burn the wheel bearings out pulling it behind that car."

It was a good thing that he couldn't see inside the car. Frankly, I was scared to death but, believe it or not, some of the boys had the nerve to start laughing just as we pulled away.

The next day he got the word out to us that he thought he knew who took the rake and gave us two days to bring it back or else he would report it to the Sheriff. We worried and sweated it out for about two weeks because the rake was no longer parked on the bridge and we didn't know what had happened to it.

To our surprise the sheriff never came for us. We were to learn later



that the man had bought the hay rake from the very man on whose bridge we had left it. He had never paid in full for it and the man who sold it felt like it was fate that he got it back. In his words, "I don't know who returned my rake but I intend to keep it."

So I guess you could say that's what saved us from the sheriff.

Shortly after that a travelling roller rink came to a nearby town. We couldn't wait to strap on the roller skates after watching some young folks glide around so free and easy. About a dozen of us hit the rink at the same time and most of us had never had on a pair of skates in our lives. I really don't know how to explain what took place but all you could see was flailing arms, bodies going in all directions and legs flapping in the air.

Some of the boys, including the Mastermind of Pranks, decided that they were going to buy a pair of roller skates and practice at home just so they could get back on the rink and show their stuff. Mr. Mastermind would practice for hours on his front porch and finally got to where he could at least stand up on them.

About this time the coal miners went on strike at the big mines. The small truck mines kept on mining coal but the miners were threatened by some of the striking miners. About a half mile from Mastermind's house one of these small mines was producing coal and was being patrolled day and night by the state police. Mastermind got some of us together one night and decided that we should pay the mine a visit and have a little fun.

We waited till we seen the state police make their rounds and figured they wouldn't be back for at least an hour, which would give us plenty of time. We arrived at the mine out of breath and hurriedly placed a stick of black powder in the slate dump that was close to the tippie and guard shack. All we intended to do was cause a little commotion and scare the guard.

As soon as we lit the short fuse we started running back across a small bridge that spanned a ditch. There was a small hole in the bridge that we failed to see in the dark and one of our gang stepped in it and caught his leg. He started yelling and we all ran back to get him out. About that time the stick of black powder went off and covered us with slate. Fortunately no one got hurt so we tore out down the old dusty road as fast as we could go.

Just before we got to Mastermind's house two cars were coming toward us so we slowed to a walk just not to look suspicious. We didn't slow down long, though, because we seen that it was the state police and knew that they would be back looking for us as soon as they found out about the blast at the mine.

Mastermind's house sat right at the edge of the road surrounded by a six-foot fence. Just as we got to his house the lights from the police cars were already coming into view on the road. I guess the watchman had pointed them in our direction.

Mastermind is about six feet, four inches tall and when he jumped that fence he cleared it at least four feet. As soon as he landed he gave a kangaroo leap to the porch and landed so hard that it jarred the door open. He disappeared inside safe and sound, leaving the rest of us to hide any way we could.



Some of the boys hid behind trees but some of us went off the road under a bridge and stood in water over our shoe tops till the police went on past. We all finally made it to our homes by wading the creek, cutting through fields and woods and anyway we could in order to stay off the road. All the time old Mastermind is in his warm bed safe and sound, planning his next prank.

We all laid low for the next few weeks till it died down. He didn't venture out on the porch with his roller skates on but done all his practice in the house where you could hear loud noises. I was told later that he knocked over furniture, jarred all the pictures off the wall and made a general mess of the house before his mother finally put a stop to it.

I would tell you his name but he was, and still is, a very good friend of mine. I don't believe they would arrest us for that after almost forty years but you never can tell. So I will tell you his nickname because I know he has outlived it long ago. Nobody will remember it anyway.

Shucks, I know they won't arrest him 'cause his office is right next door to the jail and he has worked there for years.

We called him Porky.

## CHRISTMAS IN THE 30's



The snow was falling on frozen ground in the community of Stone Creek in Lee County, Virginia, on that night before Christmas sometime in the 1930's. I was nine or ten years old and my Dad took me to a Christmas play/party at Penn Lee Coal Company.

It was being held at one of the old mining camp houses that they used for a church. The Christmas tree was decorated with tinsel, crepe paper, pop corn and an assortment of cut out paper crayon colored figures. Alongside todays Christmas trees it would look drab, but at that time it was the most elaborate thing that I had every seen in my young life. In my memories some fifty years later it still remains as fresh and good as it was on that night.

The play was put on by the miners and I will never forget one of the comedy parts was played by a young man by the name of "Jabbo" Taylor. I remember my Dad saying that "Jabbo" was the best coupler that he had ever seen work behind a motorman.

After the play was over each miner was given a grocery bag full of oranges, apples, nuts and candy. One bag for each child in the family. I don't remember how many children there were in our family at the time but I do know that it was a four room house full. Dad filled a burlap bag--we called them grass sacks--with the grocery bags. Two of the bags went into another grass sack for me to carry home.

We hoisted them across our backs and set out for home--a distance of four and one-half miles. The snow was coming down in big flakes, with perhaps three inches already on the ground.

Lights were on in Mack Stapleton's house and most everybody was still up at the Maness, Evans, Harber and Bruner homes. At Stone Creek we passed Acy Stapletons, Mr. Coopers and Mr. Osborne's across the creek.

We turned on the old dirt Harlan Road. The first house we passed on the left across the creek was the Tide Park family's, a two story white house. At that time in my life that house was a mansion to me. We rested for a few minutes as I stared at the house and wondered what it would be like to live in a house like that.

The snow had filled the ruts of the old dirt road and you had to watch where you stepped to keep from falling. On past Admant Baptist Church, the Stapleton place on the right and Jim Harber's on the left. Our next rest was in front of the old Steve Napier place. Across the creek you could barely make out the Ben Harber and Charlie Thompson places through the falling snow.

Then on past the Wheeler place, Finley and Dave Napier's, and right near the Belgium School house, the Greens--was it Sally Green?--I can't recall. Anyway, it was Lee Green's mother. Then alongside the creek by Frank Deans. At Billy Dean's we rested again as I looked at the two story house, another mansion, I thought.

After that came Elzie Burgin and Howard Smallwood's places above the

road. Below the road was where Caner Parsons lived with his wife, Mandy. She walked all over Lee County delivering babies, including me.

The next house across the creek was Granny Thompson--don't recall her name. Her son lived there--Richard. Everybody called him Rich Granny. He called me "Fiddlin' John Carson." Finally we passed Woodard's store, Harve Doss's house and Joe Doss's store.

I went to bed sometime after midnight and lay there for a long time still excited about the journey that I had just been on. Looking back now, I am amazed at how happy anyone could be with so little. I have had many good Christmases since then, some not so good and some great, but none will every equal that one.

I went with my Dad one other time after that and my Uncle Wright gave us a ride home. My Dad walked to and from Penn Lee Coal Company every work day, leaving before daybreak and getting back home after dark.

After I grew up I didn't see eye to eye with my Dad and I am truly sorry about that. But in his last years I grew closer and closer to him and will never forget a short time before his death. We went back in the hills to the old Kirk and Napier grave yards and walked through the woods most of the day.

He told me of the hard work at Penn Lee, the gob, rock, and up and down roller coaster seam of coal. He said 'everybody lived about as good as fifty cents or a dollar a day would let them.' He also told me some stories of his favorite story teller, Dru Ely. At the end of that day I was just as close to my Dad as on that Christmas Eve of long ago, and that's the way it should be.

\* \* \* \* \*

I talked with my Uncle Wright recently. He worked at Penn Lee for ten years. My Uncle George also worked at Penn Lee, as bookkeeper, from the beginning to when the company closed down.

Uncle Wright gave me some of the names of the men who worked there. There are many more that he can't remember. I have heard my Dad talk of some of them many times and, after I grew up, I knew many of them who lived around St. Charles. Some of them have died and some moved away. Others are still there.

There was Omor Tomlison, the owner, Mack and Bill Stapleton, Bill Sanders and the Stewarts--Sonny, Jim, Albert, Wright and Rufus. The Ely's--Olin and Hobert, Frank Carter, Frank Burke, Minner and Camel Witt, Earl Fultz, Jim Osborne, John Hendricks and Earnest Thompson. There was Zion Payne, Tom Kirk, Johnny and Paul Harris, Bill Cooper and the Jessee's--Joe, Mattie, Wright and Eckle. Also Jerry Harber, Henry Muse, Jim Denton, Wright and Vance Cottrell and Bill and Oz Newton. And Toy VanZant, Mr. Dotson, Clyde Sprinkle, a Mr. Duncon and the Webbs--Raymond, Rome, Tilson, Steve "Bulldog" and Worley.

Like I said before, some of these men are gone now and so is Penn Lee Coal Company--but not the memories; especially of a Christmas Eve when my Dad and I walked to a party and back home again on a cold, snowy night.

## FIVE ACRES--MORE OR LESS



I was driving on an old dirt road in the Cumberland Mountains of Virginia with my brother, Clinton, a while back. We came to this old house just off the road. Somebody was standing in the yard--I wonder if that's him. It's been thirty years since I've seen him.

He stood there and watched as we approached him. I remember him as always being neat and clean-shaven. This can't be him--white beard, soiled clothes. I've made a mistake, this must be somebody else. But as soon as he spoke I recognized his voice. This is him alright. I called him by his name and he began wiping the tobacco juice from his beard. Then I asked if he knew me.

He looked me up and down and I could see the painful expression on his face. He'd look at the ground and then back up at me--kinda stutter, trying to apologize for not being able to place me. "Now, now, I.. I.. lived here in.. in Lee County all my.. my life, and, and I've known a lot of people, and, and sometimes you forget. Now, seems like I should know you.. but I'm sixty-eight years old and.. and, you do forget, you know."

Then I told him where I used to work and he shouted out my name right away. He grabbed my hand in both of his--he was so happy to see me. From there the conversation went something like this: "Yes, I.. I remember you well, you.. you were always so.. so nice. Me and my brother we thought a lot of you."

"Where's your brother now?"

"Oh, he's.. he's in Indiana. He raised his family there. Why, right down there.. there at the mailbox just yest.. yest.. yesterday, I got a letter from him. He'll be in to see me in about two.. two weeks. It's been a long, long time. My dad and mother died some years ago, and.. and.. I live here on this old place all by myself, don't even have a dog, and it gets lon.. lonesome, sometimes."

Then he waved his arm and said, "Five acres here, more or less. One.. one corner at.. at that big white oak on.. on the hill there, and.. and goes across to that tall pine. Then down.. down along the branch, crosses the road to.. to that sapling, then it runs along the road two hundred feet. Back across the road again, then runs along that fence back to the white oak--five acres more or less. Good garden spot. I don't do much anymore, go around the hill and visit my neighbor. He ain't been doing well lately."

"Young girl around there, good.. good education, eleventh grade, she filled out my census papers. I couldn't understand all that stuff they wanted to know. Can't.. can't see.. see well enough, anyway."

I said, "Well, it was nice seeing you again--we'd better go."

"Well, I.. I sho.. shore am glad you came to see me. Many's the time I've thought about you. And.. and come back again, sometime, yeah, do that."

As we drove away, Clinton said, "He sure did act like he was glad to see

us--he seemed so sincere."

"Yes, Clint," I replied, "He's a simple man. He don't know how to pretend. I wish we were all that way. And another thing--he may have changed outside but inside he's as clean and white as snow--God has kept him that way."

As we drove along I could hear him saying over and over: "Five.. five acres more.. more or less, with a good garden spot. Right there at the mailbox just yesterday, a letter from my brother. He'll be home in about two weeks--it's been a long, long time."



## THE KNOB



I remember when I was a little boy visiting my Grandpa and Grandma Hobbs on top of Elk Knob. I would spend a week or two at a time. Better grandparents never lived. I guess if I could control time I would go back there as a boy and live that part of my life over again.

They worked hard but lived a good life with plenty of food. They had two or three kinds of meat for breakfast. You had to eat a good breakfast to do the hard work that they did. Of course, I didn't have to worry about the work--I was too young for that.

You could see all over Lee County, Virginia from up there. At night you could see the lights from Bonny Blue Coal Company. There were fields of corn, lush pasture dotted with cattle, sheep and hogs, and that barn with the silo and the feeder that my Uncle Murphy would put me in. I don't know what they called it; anyway, it ran from one end of the barn to the other on a cable loaded with feed for the cattle. I would get a free ride.

That barn brings back another memory; the time I went down the hill to visit Elmer Williams. He was a little older than me. We walked into the end of the barn where the tobacco was hanging. Boy, what a good smell! To this day, I still love the smell of curing tobacco. Elmer reached up and got a big leaf, stuffed it in his mouth and began to chew with the most satisfied look on his face I had ever seen. He reached and got another leaf and poked it toward me. "Have some," he said.

"My dad told me it would make me sick," I answered.

"Shucks," he said, "we have this stuff for breakfast."

Well, I figured if they could eat it for breakfast I should be able to chew it. So I put it in my mouth and rolled it around a few times and began to chew. "Not bad."

"Oh, it'll get better," he said.

Well, I want to tell you that it didn't take long for me to see that I had made a big mistake. My head started swimming, my stomach churning, my knees shaking and a number of other things happening. I sat down in the shade and it didn't take long for me to lose everything that I had ever eaten. Elmer took one last look at me and headed home.

I believe he thought I was going to die. I thought I was too, so I climbed up in that barn loft. I figured that would be the best place to die. I finally got a little better and fell asleep. I slept all afternoon and by milking time, near dark, everybody on the Knob was looking for me. They finally found me and took me to the house. I thought I would really catch it but, you know, they just kidded me about it. For a long time after that everybody teased me about wanting a chew!

My Grandpa and Grandma Hobbs had lots of turkeys and chickens up there. But I remember this one old mean turkey gobbler and a duck that was twice as mean. They would hang out in the yard at the house and, if they caught you



barefooted, which I was most of the time, watch out! Me and Uncle Murphy would start across the yard and he would start to run and yell, "Run for your life." Now he could run faster than me and if that old duck didn't get me, the gobbler would. When he got close enough he would start pecking on my heels like a woodpecker.

I have often wondered since then why Uncle Murphy always yelled when we crossed the yard. Was it to get their attention--no, he wouldn't do that to me. Well, I don't know. Years later he threw me into the deepest part of Powell River and told me to swim out. That's the day I learned to swim!

At night on the Knob we would sit around a huge fireplace, in a big dark room. My Uncle Rando would sit there dressed in riding britches and high top boots, telling scary stories about the time he was coming home at night and saw this light in a cemetery. Grandpa would say, "Aw, shaw, Rando, did you run?"

"Run--I took off like a greyhound."

Then Grandpa would look at me and wink. Grandma would notice that I was scared and say, "Now, Pappy, you and Rando are scaring these younguns to death. Come over here and sit with me, Carson." When I was safely in her arms I would ask Rando to tell us some more.

I would lay in bed at night and listen to old Frank bark the loneliest bark that I ever heard. Uncle Murphy took me almost to Buzzards Roost one time, on up higher above the Knob. Like I said, this was the best part of my life.

Years later, in the 1960's, before my Dad passed away, while on a visit with him and my mother, I asked them if they would like to go up there. "Lord," Mom said, "we would never get up there." But I could tell she wanted to go. So one day we prepared to go--Mom, Dad, Linda, Clinton, Gola, me and my wife.

We parked at the foot of the Knob and walked past a house. A young man came out. We talked for awhile and learned he had lived there about two years and he worked at Westmoreland Coal Company. I told him we were going up on the Knob.

"What's you going up there for? There ain't nothing up there," he said. "It's all growed up. They tell me people used to live up there over 40 years ago but I don't believe it."

We walked away and started to climb. I stopped and looked back down the hill. He was still standing there shaking his head. "Wouldn't surprise me if you don't get lost up there," he yelled. "I still can't understand what's up there."

On the way up I told Mom that if the Lord sent Grandma and Grandpa back and gave them a choice of where to live, I bet they would choose the Knob. "I don't know," she said. "It was awful unhandy up here and the girls didn't like it much."

Well we huffed and puffed and I remembered, when I was small with my short legs, it seemed to take all day to get up there. Now with my long legs I began to wonder if we would get there in a day.

We finally made it. The house had been torn down but part of the old

barn and silo was still there. The fields had grown up with scrub brush and young timber. But you could still see all over Lee County.

"Lord," Mom said, "you can see all over the world from up here." While they were looking out over the world I sat down under an old walnut tree and looked back over forty years or more to the 1930's.

A shadow on the ground in front of me caused me to look up to see a great hawk headed for Buzzards Roost. He was struggling for altitude but as he climbed higher he seemed to get in an updraft and slowly soared out of sight with the sun glistening on his wings. I rested my head against the tree. I was tired and sleepy from that climb.

I looked out over the green fields at the cattle, sheep and hogs. A team of mules goes by pulling a wagonload of corn. That's Uncle Rando on the wagon seat. I'll run and catch on to the back of the wagon and ride to the silo with him. But I can't catch it--just when I get right up ready to catch on it moves away from me--and I'm out of breath. So I'll just walk on down to the barn. Then somebody says, "You want a chew? Aw, go on, we have this for breakfast."

I go back to the house. When I'm going across the yard the mean old gobbler and twice-as-mean duck chases me in the house. Grandma says, "Carson, call Pappy and Rando. It's suppertime."

After supper, Uncle Murphy puts another big log on the fire. Uncle Rando spits in the flames and starts another one of his stories. Grandpa looks at me and winks. As the story goes on, I get real scared looking at the dark room behind me. "Aw, shaw," Grandpa says, "did you run, Rando?"

Then Grandma says, "Come on over here with me, Carson." Then she laughs and says, "Pappy, you and Rando scare these younguns to death."

Later I feel cold and try to get closer to the fire, but I can't move. I keep trying to move. Finally, someone has me by the shoulders shaking me. I open my eyes and look up at Clinton. "Come on," he said, "the sun has gone down and it's getting cold. Was you dreaming? Looked like you was trying to move."

"Yes," I said sadly, "just dreaming."

Mom said, "Younguns, let's get off here before dark sets in."

Down the hill away, I turned for a last look and there by the barn stood Grandpa and Grandma smiling and waving good-by. Old Frank was with them, wagging his tail. I yelled for Mom and the rest to look but when I looked again they were gone.

"What was it?" Mom asked.

"Oh, nothing," I said. "Guess I'm just tired and seeing things."

Down at the bottom the young man greeted us with, "Well, I see you didn't get lost. What did you find up there? Nothing, like I told you, uh? You know, I forgot to tell you before you went up there, an old man and lady with their dog came through here awhile back, headed up there. I never did see them come back--they may have got lost up there. At night I can hear a dog barking--the most lonesome howl and bark I ever heard."

"What did this man and woman look like?" I asked.

"The man had gray hair, mustache and was always smiling. The lady was

slightly stooped and called the man Pappy and once she called him Tommy. They had this big, reddish-brown dog."

"Did they call him Frank?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, "How did you know that?" I could tell he was puzzled. After a moment of silence he said, "Well, what's up there?"

"Well, for one thing son, you can get close to God."

"Oh, that stuff," he said, "I don't believe in that."

We got in the car and as we drove away, I saw him shaking his head and saw his lips form the words, 'How did he know that dog's name?'

I didn't sleep well that night. The next morning I drove out that way and stopped at the young man's house. He greeted me more cheerful than he had the day before but seemed troubled. "Mister, I bet you're tired from climbing up there yesterday," he said.

"Yes, I am," I said. "My legs are sore."

Then he said, "You know, I didn't sleep good last night and I could hear the mournful howl and bark of that dog. I think I ought to apologize to you. You see, I told you a fib about seeing the old man and lady and their dog going up there. That wasn't true. But I did dream it one night and you seemed to know who I was talking about when I described them. How did you know that dog's name? Were they related to you?"

"Yes, son, they were my grandparents and they lived up there in the thirties."

"Mister, how's it possible that I could dream of someone that I never saw or heard of before. Is that a sign of something?"

"Could be the Lord is trying to tell you something--maybe both of us."

"Mister, there's a little church down the road yonder and come Sunday, me and my wife are going to be there. You know, we live here in this beautiful valley but seems that darkness has settled in over our lives and we want to do something about it. Now I want to ask you a favor. I know that you're tired from climbing up there yesterday but my wife and I would like for you to go up there with us today. Will you?"

I answered, "You know, son, that soreness in my legs ain't there no more and even though you're at least thirty years younger than me, I believe I can beat you up there. So come on. But ain't you afraid I will get you lost?"

"No," he said. "I think up there I might find myself."

Several years have passed since then and I often mention going up there again. Everytime I do though, someone will always ask, "Why? What's up there? It's all growed up."

I guess the only thing I can tell you is, go on up there, look out over the world and back into the 1930's. Sit down under that old tree, take a nap and dream. Then come back and tell me there's nothing up there.

## MY SILVER DOLLAR

Honey, we'll miss you and write when you can.  
Then she'd reach out and place a  
Silver Dollar in your hand.  
Now hold on and keep this in remembrance of me,  
And make the good soldier that I want you to be.

She gave out Silver Dollars to all  
The young boys she knew  
As they left their homes for World War II.  
She loved them all and had a mother's concern  
For all the young men and their safe return.

Now you hurry back, and be good while you're gone,  
And don't forget to keep in touch  
With your family, for they feel so alone.  
With a big old hug and a tear in her eye,  
That big round-faced smile would fade into a cry.

She gave me my Silver Dollar back in 1944.  
I wonder just how many she gave out.  
I don't need to look at it to remember her,  
Cause she was like a momma to me, too.  
Oh, well, she had her faults as we all do,  
But I know she had the biggest heart and  
It must have been of pure gold!

Yes, she was a caring person and  
I will always treasure my Silver Dollar  
And never forget her.  
You know, in my mind's eye, I can see a long line  
Of soldiers at Stone Creek, and  
That smiling face of hers passing in review.

## HITCHHIKER



It's a cool day in late November, 1978. I'm digging a hole here in my back yard. About thirty feet away there's a box that I have just finished nailing together. In that box is the subject of the story that I'm about to tell you.

About two years ago I was going up into Virginia to see my mother. My wife fixed me a couple of ham sandwiches and a thermos of coffee. I always enjoy stopping somewhere at a picnic area in Tennessee, stretching my legs, resting awhile and eating my lunch.

So, I was driving along in Tennessee, seen this picnic area, looked nice and clean, so I pulled off the road, got out, went over to a table. From under the table an old dog crawled out and looked up at me with his big, sad, brown eyes. He had big floppy ears and was quite gray around his nose.

It was pretty obvious to me that somebody had dropped him off. I've got my opinion of that kind of person, too.

Somebody stopping every now and then to picnic and giving him a bite or two was, I guess, the only way he had of getting anything to eat. There was water right down under the hill but if he got much more feeble, he wouldn't be able to get up and down that hill. And, of course, the table was the only shelter he had.

Using all his strength he got to his feet and wagged his tail.

I petted and talked to him a bit and he wound up with my ham sandwiches. As I drove away, he crawled back under the table, content for the time being.

After two days with my mother I was on my way back home. The closer I got to that picnic area, the more I thought about him. So, just before I got there I stopped at this little store and got a couple of cans of dog food, just in case he was still there.

I pulled in and he was still under the table. Looked thinner than he had two days before. I stood there looking at him and just couldn't see how he would make it here much longer. Winter was not far away and he could never make it through a winter here.

People just don't stop and eat at picnic areas much in the Winter. So he wouldn't get anything to eat and wouldn't have the strength to get up and down that hill for water. I fed him the dog food and sat there and wondered what in the world am I going to do about this dog?

All my life I've had a habit of picking up dogs that were hurt, taking them to the vet, finding a home for them, feeding them, etc. Just got a soft spot for dogs, I reckon.

Well, I thought, I'll just take him with me. I'll take him on down the road somewhere and maybe I can give him away to somebody. He was standing there shivering.

I reached down and picked him up and placed him on the seat of my pickup truck. I turned on the heat as soon as I got started and the first thing I knew he was all stretched out on the seat with his head on my lap. Don't guess

he had been that comfortable in a long time.

I drove about two hours and stopped for gas. While paying for the gas I got an idea. So I said to the station owner, "I notice a lot of service stations have dogs that they lock in their stations at night for protection against burglary. You don't have one, do you?"

"No," he said.

"How would you like to have one?"

He said, "Why, I might take one."

So I said, "Come out here, I've got one in my truck."

We went out to my truck and dog gone, he laughed at me. "You call that a dog?"

I said, "Well, he's kind of old and thin, but, uh.."

"I wouldn't mind having a dog around here but I tell you, Mister, that dog's on his last legs. What I want is a good watch dog."

"Yes, I guess you're right," I said. So, I got back in the truck and went on down the road. The closer I got to home the more worried I got. I couldn't figure out what to do with the dog. My wife had just set her foot down and told me that we were not having any more dogs. At that time we had one small dog we kept in the house.

So I think, well, I'll just have to take him on home. I'll leave him in the truck and feed him something and tomorrow I'll find somebody that wants him.

I got home that night, went in and ate a bite of supper. Then I kinda sneaked a can of dog food and was headed for the truck to feed him when she seen it. She said, "Where are you going with that?"

I said, "Well, I.. I.. picked up a.. picked up a hitchhiker and he don't have any money or any place to stay tonight. I just told him to stay in the truck and I'd give him something to eat and he's going to be on his way tomorrow."

She said, "You ain't gonna do no such thing. You go on out there and bring him in here to stay tonight and besides, what are you going to feed him, dog food?"

Well I didn't know what to do so I just went on out and got the old dog and brought him in the house. There he stood in the middle of the floor.

Her eyes got big as saucers. She said, "Is that the hitchhiker you're talking about?"

"Yes," I said.

"What in the world are you going to do with.. where did you get him?"

So I told her. She said, "Well, you've already got him now so just put him in the back yard."

So I put him in the fenced-in back yard. Already had a doghouse there from another dog that had died. By the next day I had worried all night. I didn't know if she would let me keep him or not.

But I needn't have worried. She couldn't turn him out either. So I said, "What in the world are we going to call him?"

"Hitchhiker. That's a good name for him," she said.



So he wound up with the name Hitchhiker.

He would waddle over to the fence and wait for me to come home every day. I'd pick him up and place him on the seat and take him around the block.

She said, "What in the world are the neighbors going to think?"

I guess it did look kinda funny. Everyday at the same time going around the block with an old dog laying on the seat of the truck.

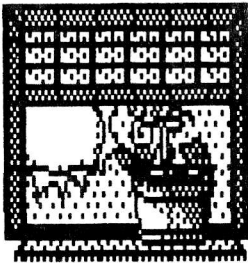
After a few months his sides filled out from being well fed. He got a lot of time laying in the sun but he got more feeble all the same. It took all the strength he could muster just to get to the fence to wait for his ride. Looked like he just couldn't make it sometimes but I never failed to give him his ride. I think he liked that truck so well because he figured it had brought him good fortune from the first day he rode in it.

But last night I came home and found him dead. He had clawed his way over to the fence as always to wait for his ride and he died there, with his nose up against the fence. So today, as I put the last shovelfulls of dirt on him, I've been thinking.

He never done nothing for me. Never rolled over, chased a stick, sat up or done anything to my commands because he was too old and feeble. But, as long as he could get the strength to wag his tail and look at me with his soft brown eyes, that done more for me than all the tricks in the world that a dog can do.

But I ain't gonna cry till I get in the house 'cause what will the neighbors think? Well, who cares what the neighbors think?

Goodbye, Hitchhiker.



## WINDOW OF LOVE

In the quiet memory room of my heart I have my memories stored in alphabetical order. Under "L" I pull out the one labeled, "Love, Window of." Now, I don't know anything about poetry but I have scribbled these words on it.

*Handle ever so gently, take great care, this is my Window of Love. This priceless, precious memory was put here by a lady who now watches from above... ..*

She didn't ask for much, just a window where she could watch for her friends and loved ones and see the coal trucks go by. The last time I went to visit her she was sitting at that window.

She started smiling and got up to open the door and, as always, she was so glad to see me. She asked me about all my family and we talked for a long time. She showed me her pictures and when she came to one of Esther and Tunis, she asked if I could stop by and see them on my way back home.

"No," I said, "I live in the other direction."

"Oh, that's right," she said, "they live in Kentucky. Have you seen Wright and Dorothy yet? When did you get in? Are you going over to see Lloyd? Have you seen Sonny? Go see Irene and Earnest and be sure you see Ruby and Harold. You must go see George and Georgia before you go back. They'll be so glad to see you. Have you seen Randall's twins?"

"You must stay for dinner, it's already cooked. All I have to do is warm it up." It had been many years since I had eaten with her. I did stay and I'm glad I did for I could see it made her happy.

Before I left I noticed that she was reaching for the walls as she walked through the house. I thought 'This might be the last time I see her.' As I waved goodbye and drove away she had taken up her position at the window, watching for the next visitor to come and talk awhile.

As I drove toward home I got to thinking about how everybody wants to be liked and loved. Then I realized that I had just left someone who really cared about me. No matter how long I have been away or what I have done, she truly loves me. I became as humble as a baby, wiping the tears away on my shirt sleeves. I could hardly see the highway. I could still see her sitting peacefully in that window.

Then somewhere in Tennessee on a lonely stretch of road, with snow falling softly, I searched out the warmest part of my heart and stored my most precious of all memories. . .and called it 'Window of Love.'

## OLD RED



There's a homemade bird feeder outside our dining room window and beginning in December, we start feeding the birds until April. A twenty-pound bag of feed lasts about ten days. Usually we get more on the ground than we put in the feeder. I have seen as many as twenty-five doves all at one time, mixed with sparrows, cardinals, cowbirds, crackels, toe-hees, chickadees and some I didn't know. This past winter we had a new visitor, a red-bellied woodpecker.

He was a good sized bird and kinda awkward--but fun to watch. He never landed on the ground; always on the bird feeder which was nothing more than a three foot by two foot piece of plyboard. He would come in something like a plane, longways of the plyboard, and drop his wings and tail and slide across the feeder with the bird seed flying in all directions--not to mention any other birds that happened to be in his path.

He would never stay long but sometimes he would linger long enough to stare at me through the window. He would pick out a sunflower seed and fly to a nearby oak tree in the neighbor's yard. He would make several trips and I could count on him paying a visit at day break each morning. I started calling him "Old Red."

I had a lot of fun watching his crazy antics and really got attached to him. By the end of February he disappeared. I thought he had met up with a BB gun somewhere, like a few of the other birds we had seen around the feeder minus a leg or with an injured wing.

Seems like along about that time everything was going wrong. Sickness and bad news from my family came from far and near; plus some stubborn problems of my own. I got all worried and depressed. It seemed that nothing was going right. That's how I felt when I went to bed one night.

As the clock ticked away I tossed and turned. As I lay there with all these troubles going through my mind I started to pray. Although I wasn't saying anything, I call it praying. If you could put it into words, I guess it would sound something like this:

"Lord, I don't usually call on you just this way, but you see things ain't going good for me lately. Well, I don't know where to start but it's just everything in general. First off, I had this great plan, at least I thought it was great, but seems I can't get it going right. Oh, there's a number of things that I should get done but nothing works out like I want it to.

"And Lord, I get all worried about my family and their problems. Take care of them, Lord, they need your help. Lord, I know there's lots of other people with bigger problems than me so I apologize for bothering you with my troubles. But if you can help me I sure would appreciate it. Thank you, Lord.

"Oh, excuse me, Lord, there's this one other thing. It's about Old Red. He ain't been around for about three weeks. Now, I sure do miss him. Shucks, I know that sounds funny to you, grown man like me worried about a crazy old

woodpecker. So excuse me, Lord, I'm sorry I brought it up. Well, I'm kinda tired now, Lord. Guess I'll try and get some sleep. Goodnight, Lord."

I awoke at three a.m. for no reason. Everything was quiet except for the neighbor's dog barking. Although I had only slept for a short time I felt rested and calm. I had a clear head and things that I had worried about and talked to the Lord about didn't seem that important at all. Things that I couldn't get done didn't seem to need doing in the first place. That great plan I had; now I could see how silly it was and felt ashamed of it.

My family and the things that were happening to them--why everything would work out all right in the end. So why all the worry. And Old Red--shucks, I don't know why I brought that up in the first place. I laid there for a long time before I began to realize that the Lord was answering my prayers from the night before.

It's funny how different you feel about things at three in the morning. I wonder if it's like that just before death, when everything clears up and things that you have worried about all your life become so little that they mean nothing.

I got up at six. I felt refreshed--much better. I plugged in the coffee pot and looked out the dining room window at an assortment of doves, sparrows and cardinals feeding. After a few minutes, I sat down at the table with a cup of coffee.

I had been sitting there about five minutes when something caught my eye at the feeder. It was Old Red coming in with that familiar tail landing, scooting across the feeder with birds and seed flying in all directions. He made several trips back and forth from the feeder to the oak tree.

Finally, he lingered long enough between trips to look through the window at me with his head held sideways and mouth open as if he were saying, "Hey, old coot, here I am. What's been worrying you? Heck, I don't have time to fool around here just so you can look at me. I have a family to raise."

He came around for the next three mornings and I knew he wanted me to know that he was there because he would make all manner of racket pecking holes in a dead limb on that old oak tree. He even tried the rain gutter. It sounded like a machine gun.

After three days he disappeared. I began to think I would never see him again but I walked out of the house just this morning and heard that crazy call of his. I looked up and he was hanging high on a telephone pole and along side him was his mate. He kept up that wild call as he looked down at me. My instinct tells me he was saying, "Hey, old coot, look what I got."

I guess Old Red is busy raising his family this summer. I sure hope he brings them to the feeder this winter. I want to see them all together.

Now I know I'll have more "threes in the morning" cause the Lord didn't tell me he would wipe all my troubles away. No sir, he just helps me with them and brings them down to size and shows me just how small they really are.

Did he send Old Red back? I don't know. He could have 'cause he put him here to begin with. There's one thing I do know, though. I will never take anything for granted, no matter how small, if it looks like it might be the answer to my prayers, not even a crazy old woodpecker.

## A HUNDRED YEARS OR MORE

I remember this man from the time when I was just a small boy. I would sit and listen to him tell about the habits of squirrels, groundhogs, birds, snakes and all of God's creatures. He could predict how cold the winters were going to be or how early Spring would arrive just by watching the birds and animals. Heavy coats and bushy tails on squirrels meant a cold winter ahead. Sparse acorn and hickory nut crops meant a mild winter ahead. He loved the land and all of God's creatures. This was all mirrored in his personality and impish, smiling eyes.

He loved to tell scary tales and watch the reactions of the youngsters who sat with eyes wide and listened to every word. I have heard him talk of far away places many times. Places that he had never seen but had heard about like Kansas, Texas or some far-off land across the waters. To my knowledge, the furthestest he was ever away from Lee County, Virginia, was to Indiana to visit his son.

He raised a fine bunch of boys and one girl the hard way--without all the conveniences that were available. His wife worked tirelessly alongside him and they never complained because theirs' was a work of love for their children.

His last years were spent on Powell River in an old-timey house built mostly of logs. He loved that old house and the river, and I'm sure he would not have traded it for a mansion on the hill.

I used to pay him a visit every time I went back to Lee County. We would have a cup of coffee together and talk of the old times. He would tell about the years he lived on Elk Knob, the hard work, cold winters, Buzzards Roost and the wild cats of the Klondike. He said he liked it up there but was glad that he now lived down in the flats as he called it there in the river valley.

I recall the last time we sat with a cup of coffee and talked. I noticed he had to wrap more fingers around the coffee cup to hold it steady, the lines were deeper in his face, and a trace of sadness was showing in his eyes. I wondered at the time if maybe he knew that he didn't have much longer here and longed for the days of his youth so he could live it all over again. Nothing any different, of course, because he was happy with the way he had lived and wouldn't change anything.

As we walked to the car he picked up his little dog, "Peppy," and carried him in his arms. We chatted for a few more minutes and I got in the car to leave. The last words he said, which I will never forget, was, "Carson, now you come back and don't stay away so long. Seems like you have been away a hundred years or more."

I looked in the rear view mirror as I drove up the hill and he was standing there holding Peppy in his arms. There's no doubt in my mind that he knew he would never see me again.

Now as I think of this man and his life and the way he lived it, I hope that I am a little like him. Secretly, I have always thought I was. It is only natural for me to think so because he was my favorite uncle.

Now I have heard of a beautiful city with streets of pure gold but he wouldn't be satisfied there, Lord, because he ain't been used to things like that and will feel out of place. So if you can, Lord, take him down the road somewhere; you must have an old house on the bend of a river, with lots of your little creatures around. Give him that old house, Lord, with an old stove so he can make himself a strong cup of coffee.

Let him tell his favorite stories of far-away places like Elk Knob, The Flats and Powell River with angels standing around listening. And, Lord, if you have another old house just around the bend of the river from there would you kinda keep it in mind for me. You see, I miss him more and more as time goes by. It seems like I ain't seen him in a hundred years or more.



## A LATE SALUTE...



McCarty..Here; Couch..Here, Sir; Staub..Here; Kirk..Here;  
Zdonic..Here; Paulik..*silence*; Parrish..Here;  
Dennis..*silence*; Pegnitone..Here; Precise..*silence*.  
The time was Christmas Eve, 1944, in Cherbourg, on the coast  
of France.

We were assembled hurriedly on a dock cluttered with U.S.  
Military supplies with everything from trucks to K rations.

We had just climbed to the dock from a destroyer that had rescued us, Company  
E. 264th reg. of the 66th Infantry Division, from a sinking troop ship, eight  
miles out in the English Channel.

The name of the destroyer was *Brilliant* and I'll never forget it and its  
crusty British crew, who calmly came to our rescue and took off as many as the  
destroyer would hold after we were torpedoed by a German U-Boat in the darkness  
of the Christmas Eve I'll never forget.

If my memory serves me correctly, seventeen of our company didn't answer  
roll call that night. Some of them turned up in hospitals the next day; taken  
there because of injuries or overexposure to the cold December waters where  
they had clung to rafts or, in some cases, been pulled from the water and lived  
to tell about it. But some of them would never answer roll call again.

We stood there shocked, cold and lonely. The biggest part of our company  
was made up of 18 and 19 year olds, of whom most had never been out of their  
home states in their young lives.

Although we had prepared for the worst in our tough infantry training,  
this was quite a blot considering that we hadn't reached the front lines yet.

We stayed assembled there for a few hours, waiting for the rest of the  
regiment up and down the docks of Cherbourg, to get a head count and some kind  
of order restored and then maybe we could get settled somewhere out of the  
cold. As we stood there, you could hear hands slapping together and the dull  
thud of boots as we tried to keep the circulation going to our cold hands and  
feet.

As we waited, my thoughts flashed back to basic training and Precise. He  
was from Alabama. Although I had a southern drawl I wasn't accustomed to his,  
which seemed to stretch from here all the way across the Mississippi.

He was our source of laughs in basic training, never on time for  
anything. Some fuzz left on his face after a shave, a button not fastened  
somewhere, tie knotted in a big ball, cap at a crazy angle for inspection, and  
always the last one out for reveille after his name had been called several  
times. Then he would most likely be buttoning his fatigues or the laces would  
be flying loose on his leggins (at that time we didn't have combat boots) as he  
rushed to take his place among the rest of the company in the early morning  
darkness of basic training. I have seen him with his leggins on backwards and  
laced inside instead of out.

He was a shrewd poker player and manys the time I had seen him clean out

a poker game and then loan out the money with interest until payday rolled around again. He did this to the city slickers, too.

But he was always late for everything and now I was not surprised that he didn't answer roll call here tonight 'cause I figured he never made it to the top deck when the torpedo hit our rickety troop ship out there in the channel. He probably slept through it all and went down with the ship.

I have always been one to be early for everything and could never understand why some people, usually the same ones, come in late for work or church or whatever. I don't think I ever went to a funeral that someone didn't come in late and I would think that they would be late for their own funeral. I guess if I was sentenced to die in the electric chair, I would want to be there at least thirty minutes early just to sit in that chair and get ready for it. So myself, along with most of the others, didn't think we would ever see Precise again. He had lagged behind once too often.

But to our surprise two days later, we got word that he was in the hospital suffering from exposure to the cold, icy waters, where he had clung to a small raft and was finally picked up by a tugboat. Of course, everyone was overjoyed that he had come through it after all and he soon became our source of laughs again.

Some months later a few of our company assembled again. I can't remember all the names because thirty-nine years have done a lot to dull my memory of names, but I do recall Sgt. Paulik from Ohio, Sgt. Dennis from North Carolina and Pfc. Precise from Alabama. I wasn't at this assembly because it was a special thing. These boys were being decorated for bravery and I'm sure Precise was late for this one too, 'cause knowing him, he wouldn't think this was any more important than early morning reveille in basic training. But to me it was his proudest day for, you see, the boy that was always late, never passed inspection, liked to play poker better than anyone I've ever known and couldn't care less about the basics of being a soldier, had been on the tail end of the line when we took turns at the rail of the ship to jump to the destroyer that had pulled alongside and when it finally came his turn, he gave it up to help the wounded over the rail until there was no room left. He watched it move away just as the ship's engine room exploded and it sank to its watery grave, taking 800 soldiers with it.

Precise has cluttered my memories all these years and I still chuckle when I see someone come rushing in late for work, or church or a funeral, whatever. I can see him come tearing out of the barracks in basic training, shoes unlaced, unbuttoned shirt, leggins flying in the breeze. Then I think how wrong I could be about these people that are always late, at least I was about Precise.

I got to thinking about him a while back and wondered if he was still living and if his story had ever been told. Knowing him, I don't think he would ever tell it himself, 'cause he wouldn't think it was that important. But I think it was that important and to you people off yonder in Scottsboro, Alabama, you have a real hero among you, not one created for the movies or the television screen. No sir, you've got a real one!

So on this Christmas of 1983, thirty-nine years away from his finest hour, you should honor him with a little party, a handshake or a slap on the back and tell him how much you appreciate what he did, 'cause we need more of that kind of thing in our country right now. If you do give him a party, don't expect him to be on time for I don't believe he will ever change and that's the way it should be; I don't want to remember him any other way.

So, Lloyd B. Precise, I salute you wherever you are and I'm proud I serve with you!

\*\*\*\*This story was carried in The Daily Sentinel, Scottsboro, Alabama, on December 11, 1983. Sometime after the story ran, K. Carson Kirk and Lloyd B. Precise met to share their memories of that fateful night in Cherbourg, France. The story of their reunion was carried across the nation by the Associated Press.



## A LOTTA BULL

"Yessir," he said as he clipped away at my hair, "I tell you I don't know what the world is coming to; you just can't believe anything or trust anybody anymore. And I'll tell you another thing," he went on, "it's gonna get worse. Just look at all this long hair, and try to listen to some of that loud stuff they call music. If it keeps up you'll see more come from it than we bargained for."

I watched him in the mirror on the wall in front of me as he lathered the back of my neck. "And another thing, these taxes we're paying," he said as he played the straight razor across the razor strap, "they keep going up ad up and folks are mighty tired paying hard earned money to see it thrown around on this, that and the other."

Then I watched him raise the razor above my head and start a wide sweeping arc with his arm as he finished the subject. "I tell you, son, there's a day of reckoning coming, and soon."

It was back in the 1960's in Orlando, Florida. 'Ol Jabe ran a one-chair barber shop with three chairs for his waiting customers, which most of the time were occupied. I had long since found out never to go there if you were in a hurry 'cause Jabe didn't know what the word meant. Along with the everyday grumblings that come with the news he had some unusual stories that always seemed to end when he had the straight razor in his hand and he would finish with that grand swinging arc.

The walls were decorated with stuffed birds and mounted bass that he had caught out of a local lake. He wouldn't tell you which one. Signs everywhere like *No Cussing in This Place of Business*, *Fishermen Don't Lie* and one that he had just hung recently scrawled in red pencil that said: *'No Long Hair Cut In Here. If You Have Long Hair Go To A Beauty Shoppe. I Only Cut Men's Hair.'*

"If they want to look like women let 'em go where the women go," he would say.

I remember more than once somebody with long hair would come in and before they could be seated he would bark out, "No long hair cut in here."

If they asked him where they could get it cut he would come around with that long sweeping arc with his arm right in front of their face and at the end of it he would point in the direction of the beauty shop down the street and say, "Down at the beauty shop with the women." I seen him do this once when he had the straight razor in his hand and if the young man hadn't flinched, I believe it would have cut off the end of his nose.

As time went on the beauty shop just about doubled their business from the men he sent there.

One day as he was shaving my neck he asked, "Did I tell you about going down to the beauty shop?"

"No," I answered.

"Well, I did, son, and you ain't seen such a sight. They had three men and four women customers. One man was under the hair dryer and if that wasn't

a sight; he was watching 'As the World Turns' on T.V. while the girl cleaned his fingernails. One was waiting and reading the *Ladies Home Journal* and the third was standing in front of the mirror admiring his new hairdo and adjusting the gold chain that was strung around his neck. Just made me sick; thought I was going to throw up. And you know what I seen on my way out?"

I could tell he was coming to the end of the story when he raised the razor high over his head and held it there. "A man wearing earrings, yessir, earrings hanging down almost touching his shoulders. The truth if I ever told it." Then he started the long sweeping arc with the razor. "What's this world coming to? Makes me mad as hell."

'Ol Jabe finally sold his shop in 1970 just before I moved from Orlando to Decatur, Georgia. I went to see him before I left and he was still quite active and grumbling about the news and the state of the world. And, as usual, he told me one of his stories that capped anything that I had ever heard him tell. "Three young fellers drove up about six months ago," he said. "College boys dressed in long, white coats. Wanted to know if they could do some digging on my property. Said they were looking for bones of prehistoric animals. I told them they could dig out there in the Palmetto thicket but to watch out for the rattlesnakes. Well, they dug out there for better than a week.

Then one day they found some bones and the newspaper people came out here. Story in the paper said they found some prehistoric animal that was a million or so years old.

They tell me they're gonna travel around the country in a long van financed by tax dollars to show it off. But now let me tell you something. I buried an old bull there in the Palmetta 'bout two years ago and, Son, that's what they dug up. So if they come around advertising that they've found some prehistoric animal, don't you believe a damn word of it."

Then he lifted the rake that he had been leaning on high above his head and with a wide swinging arc he finished up, "It's a lotta bull, Son, a lotta bull."

## TREASURES OF MY HEART

It was November 10, 1983, when I received a late night phone call. I hate to get late night calls. For some reason I always think that they bring bad news. "Hello, is this Mr. Kirk?" the man asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"Mr. Kirk, I understand you're a friend of Talmadge Barnes. His wife asked me to call you. He's in the hospital in Gainesville in very poor condition. Heart attack with other complications. It don't look good."

We talked for a couple of minutes. I thanked him for calling and asked him to please call me if anything happened. I told my wife that we would try to go up there the next morning or on the weekend. Gainesville is 80 miles from where we lived in Decatur, Georgia.

But early the next morning, November 11th, the phone rang while I was shaving. "Hello, Mr. Kirk, Talmadge just passed away, just a few minutes ago. Sorry to call you so early but I thought you would want to know."

"Yes, I appreciate you calling. Tell Lois that we will get in touch." I sat down, stunned. My wife and I began to talk about him. I met him in 1973 when he lived on a little farm in Jackson, Georgia, 40 miles south of Decatur. Although he was a much younger man than me our friendship grew. We would visit them and the women folk seemed to hit it off real good.

I butchered a hog for him one fall and he insisted on raising one for me the next year. He worked at rebuilding a transmission for quite some time and, to my surprise, finally reinstalled it in his car in good working order. HE installed a power steering on his pickup truck with his own hands and I was flabbergasted.

What's so special about this you may ask. You see, this man was blind; stone blind. He was a former mechanic but the feats this man performed after he lost his sight were sometimes beyond belief. He did everything to his cars but drive them.

I saw him drive his farm tractor to plow the garden with his wife Lois riding next to him to serve as his eyes. I was puzzled when he told me that he had worked on his fence till 10 p.m. and I almost asked him how he could see. Noting my puzzlement he began to laugh and said, "You see, it don't make a difference to me." We laughed about much the same thing one time when they were visiting at our house. I showed him to the bathroom and turned on the light.

He was a fun loving person and took great pleasure in his horses. He named them Kelly and Pretty Girl. I can still see him standing at the fence with one hand stroking Kelly's neck while he talked to her. He loved his seeing eye dog, Noreen, although he didn't totally depend on her.

He wasn't the kind of person to show his feelings but as his health grew worse, he had to sell the horses because he just wasn't strong enough to take care of them anymore. I saw deep sadness in him then. Not long after that Noreen died and his other dog, Pokey, tried to fill the void but never could.



Then came the day that they decided to sell the little farm, tractor and all. They moved to Cleveland, Georgia, next door to Lois' mother and father, in a neat little mobile home.

His health went downhill rapidly after that but you would never have noticed it. He was a stubborn person who wanted to keep going and doing things. He built a little porch and steps on each side of their mobile home; and he built a garage for his '57 Chevy out of rough lumber and barn tin. Not a pretty thing, but he done a better job than a lot of sighted people could have done.

I watched him drive nails; not perfect every time but most of the time. I remember once he told me that as long as he looked at the nail that he could hit it. I think that was true; as long as he concentrated he had no trouble driving the nail. He cane-bottomed chairs, made potholders and a number of other things. I could go on and on with all the things that I seen this amazing man do.

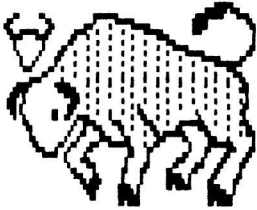
He was an inspiration to his little church. At the funeral we sat next to an old lady. She leaned over and whispered, "He has prayed some of the sweetest prayers that I have ever heard right here in this church." The first song they sang at the funeral was *Amazing Grace*. I had never heard that sung at a funeral before and thought it was kind of strange until they came to the part, "Was blind but now I see."

Just recently we stood with Lois at his grave, looking at his headstone that they had just put there. It's on a hill above Cleveland, Georgia, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, a neat little cemetery bordered by houses on two sides with children playing. He would like that.

As I stood there I thought of something the preacher said at his funeral; preachers have a way of saying things. "Don't be grieved about Talmadge not being here, because he's with the Lord. Treasure up his memories in your heart."

You know, the meaning of that brings tears to my eyes because the Lord has blessed me with some unusual and wonderful people in my life. Along with Talmadge Barnes they are, and will always be, treasured up memories in my heart.

## EL TORO



He walked without moving his hips; slightly bent over, like he was in pain. One arm hung in kind of a low position and the hand and fingers on it were drawn out of shape. Only one side of his shirt was wet with sweat.

I looked him over and wondered how in the world he ever got in this kind of shape so I asked him. "None of your damn business," he said. "What's it to you?"

I dropped the subject. A few days later he opened up a bit and began to talk. "I followed the Rodeo as a cowboy and clown," he said. "Don't know how many bones been broken in my body. All I know is I can tell you when it's gonna rain from the hurt I get.

"Got a nerve pinched in my back so I only sweat on one side. I've had my guts in my hands--this crazy bull got me down one time, tore my shirt off, stomped me, just about done me in. The Rodeo clown was supposed to get him off me. Well, he got scared and ran like hell."

Then he started telling me about operating one of those mechanical bulls in a nightclub. "It's belt-driven with slow and fast settings. We call it El Toro," he said.

"Now, some of these old fat slobs come in and they can't hardly get on; I have to help them. They probably never seen a bull before. And them drunks--they'll holler out, 'Set it as fast as it'll go!' So I do and they hit the floor. They tell me they know all about riding; some of them never been on a horse, let alone a bull.

"The only pleasure I get out of it is helping the pretty girls on, but don't you tell my wife. It's a job, that's about all I can say. I'd rather be around the real thing with the snorts and the smell of the Rodeo or out on my ranch in Colorado.

"Yessir, I got a ranch out there and up in the High Country, there's cliffs that will shelter the cattle in the winter time. It don't rain much out there. Why a spit is a thunderstorm. But someday, that's where I'll be; out in God's country.

"Yessir, you name the Rodeo and I've been there--Baton Rouge, Lake Charles, Memphis, Brownsville, Forth Worth and El Paso, Texas. Damn! What dusty country--all over California and Montana, Perry, Ocala and Kissimmee, Florida, Oklahoma City, New Mexico, Calgary, Cheyenne, Wyoming and out in Colorado.

"I've rode 'em all, and I've got the proof on my body to show for it--but I'd do it all over again. So come on all you suckers and ride El Toro 'cause that's as close as you'll ever get to a real bull. But not me, sucker, for one of these days I'll be in Colorado."

## TALL AS OLD STONE FACE

He would park his car under a shade tree in some little town or community in Lee County, Virginia; usually across from a beer joint or movie house. He would put a record on the old record machine and fill the whole town with gospel music from the big speaker mounted on top of his car. Most of his selections were "The Chuck Wagon Gang."

After about four songs he would get out of the car, Bible in hand, wet his finger, turn to his text and preach a sermon. Only a few would gather to listen; mostly miners in town for shopping or a hell-raising Saturday night.

That's how I remember him from the 1940's. A tall, pale, thin man who didn't seem to be in the best of health. I never thought he would live to be very old.

He had a large family and I remember, when they piled in that car all you could see were a lot of little heads. Throughout the 1940's he was faithful to show up in some town or community on Saturday.

Like I said before his congregation was mostly miners in town for a day and night of fun; some with bottles hid away under their shirts. To my knowledge he pastored no church at that time nor attended any Seminary to prepare for the ministry.

I guess the town and its people, where ever he would stop and a few would gather, was his church. Most church members frowned on what he did but I give him credit for having hope, however small, of reaching someone in those little gatherings of, mostly, whiskey-drinking and, sometimes, gun-toting men. And, after all, haven't we all heard of another man who, many, many years ago, walked across the land preaching and healing.

I left Lee County, Virginia in 1951 and had no idea as to what happened to him but, just before Christmas, 1984, I was looking through the *Powell Valley News* from Lee County and came across a picture of him and his wife that was taken on their fifty-seventh wedding anniversary. I was not only surprised that he was still living but at how good he looked. Even at his age, he looked much better than he did in the 'Forties; so the Lord had taken good care of him. My memories took me back to a Saturday in St. Charles and I could see him standing under that old Sycamore tree, wetting his finger, turning to his text and preaching a sermon.

Just as Preacher Green, Bill and Lula Jones, George Washington of St. Charles, the cold spring in the gap of the mountain, the winding stairs on the way to Big Stone Gap or the Powell River flowing through the gorge at Woodway; Harden Stapleton belongs to and is a part of, Lee County, Virginia. In my memories he stands as tall as "Old Stone Face" and is just as solid.



## OLD FLAME

She's an old love that refuses to fade into the past. Unlike other loves I knew in my youth which are now just unimportant memories, this old flame still lights up the corners of my mind. Her beauty surpassed anything I had ever seen and still does.

I have never known contentment like when I was wrapped in her arms. God, how I loved her and I've always regretted leaving her there. I cried when I left to go off to World War II in 1944 and couldn't wait to get back.

She was waiting with open arms for my return.

I cried again when I left her in 1951. At the time I thought it would only be for a short while. I've been away for thirty-four long years now.

Oh, I've been back to visit her several times and she always welcomes me back in her arms to sleep for as long as I want. She's a jewel there in the Cumberland Mountains snuggled up against Kentucky and Tennessee.

Her mama's name is Virginia. She's the County of Lee.

Why did I leave her? I guess we all do things like that when we're young and foolish. And it seems the longer you stay away the harder it is to return.

I've crossed the Atlantic Ocean to the White Cliffs of Dover; took a swim in the Mediterranean. I've travelled the Hedge Row Country of Northern France; marvelled at the beauty of the Rhine Valley of Germany and gazed at the snow capped mountains of the Alps. But I have never seen anything that can match her rugged beauty.

Yes, she's a jewel tucked back there out of everybody's way; always ready to forgive and take you back. That's Lee County and you'll never know just how much you love her till you've been away for awhile.

God.....How I love her!

## JUST CALL ME PEG



An old man with a peg leg walked into my uncle's store where I worked as a young boy. His leg was off to above the knee and you could hear the leather squeaking where the peg was attached to his leg.

He walked up to my uncle and said, "I'm a watchman at Wesley's Coal Mine on North Fork. I need some groceries on credit. Now, I'll pay you once a month. My name's Frank but just call me Peg, everybody else does."

My uncle gave him credit like I knew he would. I never seen him turn anyone down the first time.

Nobody knew much about Peg, where he came from or if he had any relatives living. It was almost impossible to find out anything from talking to him either because he wouldn't stand for any questioning. He would come out of that holler about once a week, struggling about two miles on that old peg leg.

He'd get his groceries and go right across the road to another place and guzzle down beer and wine and let people poke fun at him. "Peg, how do you drink so much. Is that peg leg hollow; is that where it goes? Dance for us, Peg." Somehow at the end of the day Old Peg would find his way back to his shack at the mine.

This went on for some time but then one cold winter morning, Wesley came into the store and said, "Boys, Old Peg's gone. I found him this morning. When I didn't see him up and around I got worried and knocked on his door. Couldn't raise him so I forced the door and there he was on the floor. Must have happened last night sometime for the fire was out in his stove. He hadn't been feeling good lately. I guess his heart just gave out."

Then Wesley asked my uncle if he would send his pickup truck back there and bring him out to the main road to the ambulance. My uncle looked at me and I nodded yes. So me and Wesley and one other man went back there to bring Old Peg out to the main road.

He was laying on the floor just like Wesley had said. We wrapped him in a blanket and placed him in the bed of the pickup truck. Then we went back inside the old shack to look around.

There in one corner was an old pot-bellied stove with a blackened coffee pot sitting on it. No telling how long the fire had been out; the shack was like an icebox.

Standing against the wall by the bunk bed was his peg leg, where he had placed it when he took it off to go to bed. Alongside the bunk there was an empty nail keg, turned upside down with a kerosine lamp, still burning, sitting on top of it.

Laying under the lamp was a Bible and an old pair of reading glasses. The Bible was open to Matthew, Chapter Eleven. As I moved closer something caught my eye. Verses Twenty-Eight, Twenty-Nine and Thirty were dirty where he had run his dirty fingers back and forth underneath them, almost like they were

underlined with a pencil.

Wesley said, "Well, boys, there's not much else we can do. I'll have to try and find out if he has any relatives that will come and take care of his belongings, and the Lord only knows how cause no one knows much about him. Boys, I'm gonna miss Old Peg around here. Even with his drinking there was something decent about him--but he was strange."

"Like how, Wesley?" I asked.

"Well, like he was always searching for something," Wesley answered.

We went out and closed the door behind us just as the old lamp flickered out. The last drop of kerosine filtered through the wick just as if it had kept watch until Old Peg was taken care of.

Now, I have thought about this all my life, what Wesley said about Old Peg acting kinda strange, like he was looking for something. I've come to the conclusion that he found it, Wesley. I think he read those verses over and over; then he rolled out of that bunk on his one good knee, and he prayed.

I believe he got up from there and was trying to get to the door to yell out to the world and tell them that he had found what he had been searching for. And I know there were tears on his cheeks, for his face was froze to the floor when we picked him up and one arm was lying extended as if trying to reach the door.

I think the Lord got sick and tired of people poking fun at Old Peg and said, "Peg, you don't have to tell the world about it; they would only laugh at you, anyway. So come with me, Peg, you've suffered enough."

I can see him now as he introduces himself to the Lord. "I'm a watchman at Wesley's Coal Mine on North Fork. My name's Frank but just call me Peg, everybody else does."



## WOMAN



I met her in 1951 at a time in my life when I needed something or someone to stem my downhill slide. Since my return from World War II I had wandered aimlessly, and sometimes recklessly, without any plans for the future whatsoever.

She was the most attractive woman I had ever met and that, along with her warm, caring personality, seemed to give new meaning to my life.

She had been deeply hurt by a first marriage that left her with three children to rear the best way she could. Her job at a factory would just barely pay the utilities and put food on the table for the youngsters. I found out later her long-kept secret of not having enough to eat herself so the children could have more.

I will never forget the old, faded green coat that she wore and I wondered if it would hold out the cold winds of Chicago one more winter. I marvelled at the way she pushed, scolded, cuddled and loved the little ones with all the instincts of a mother bird trying to feed and keep her brood in the nest until they could fly off on their own.

It took me three years of soul-searching to decide if I wanted to take over a broken heart that might not ever mend--because, after all, there's the tie that binds in a marriage that bore children.

Finally, in 1955, with still more misgivings about the situation, we were married. She took me off the streets of Chicago and gave me some sense of direction.

It hasn't ended up picture-perfect and, considering the circumstances, I guess it never will but in all honesty I have to say that I would do it all over again. I am truly sorry that a man will walk out on a good wife and his children, for whatever reason, but in this case it's his loss and my gain.

It will soon be thirty years now that we have been together, some bad times for sure, but all that is overshadowed by the sunshine and hope that she strives for every day of our time together.

I made a tape for her in 1979 for our twenty-fourth anniversary that explains my feelings for her, and hers for me.

\* \* \* \* \*

Twenty-four years with the Woman. Yes, this is our twenty-fourth wedding anniversary--and, just like all the rest of them, she had to remind me of the date.

After all these years, I still call her Woman; never call her by her name, Honey, Darling or any of the other pet names married people have. Not that I haven't tried. Every year on our anniversary I was gonna start calling her Honey, but here we are on our twenty-fourth and I've already postponed it 'til next year.

Its Woman this and Woman that; you'd think I didn't know her name. The Lord knows I don't deserve her, the way she looks after me.

"Are you feeling all right this morning? Did you work hard today? Can I bring you a cup of coffee? Wear a heavy coat today, its a lot colder outside. Did you read your Bible today, say your prayers? Have you called your mother lately?"

Well, I like to kid her and sometimes she gets mad at me. Just two weeks ago she said, "Are you going out in that weather without anything on your head? You'll catch cold."

I said, "Woman, you know that won't happen. I'm tough."

"Oh, yes, you're tough alright," she said, "so don't expect me to help you if you get sick."

And you know the very next day I was in bed with the flu. For the next three days it was: "Do you have enough cover? Are you cold? Do you want some hot tea? Here, take your aspirin. Feeling any better?"

The room smelled like a hospital. Three or four kinds of cough syrup, Vick's Salve and yes, her never-ending concern.

One morning she asked, "Are you feeling better?"

I could barely talk but I whispered, "I'm all right, Woman, I'm tough."

She smiled and turned away but not before I saw a big, old tear on her cheek.

Well, I'm back to normal now and its Woman this and Woman that but you know, I don't believe she would want it any other way because I think she sees right through me, and knows that I couldn't get along without her.

Now I'm gonna pray but I ain't gonna ask The Lord to help me call her Honey. Why a grown man like me should be ashamed asking The Lord for small things like that. But there's one thing I'm gonna ask Him for: "Please, Lord, don't let her become a memory."



## HOME COMING

I met him in Chicago. Like myself he came to the Big City in the early fifties in search of work. He came from the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas. Most of us from the South, caught up in Big City ways, flocked together and stayed pretty much to ourselves.

He often talked of his home in the Ozarks and its people; said he was going back there someday. But all the years I knew him he never returned there, not even for a visit. He said he had no living relatives.

So I would kid him and say, "Maybe you shouldn't go back there; you would just be another stranger."

"Oh, no," he'd say, "I have friends there. They won't forget me." Then he'd say, "It'll be like a Homecoming, and besides, I have this little plot of ground there."

"What's it like?" I'd ask him.

"Oh, it's beautiful. It lays in a valley of rolling hills with mountains all around. Cattle graze the green fields and the groundhogs come out and sit on the rocks to sun themselves. There's a winding road that runs by it and not too far away, there's a quiet flowing river. Early in the mornings you can look East at this beautiful mountain; it looks like the rising sun is coming right out of the top of it."

Then I'd say, "Sounds like you will be doing some fishing and gardening there when you return."

He'd smile and reply, "No, nothing like that. I just intend to rest when I go back there."

It was in the winter when he got sick and couldn't work. He was in and out of the hospital. Myself and a few others took care of him as best we could.

As Winter wore on he got worse. I would sit with him and he would get a far away look in his eyes, smile and talk of the beautiful valley surrounded by the Ozarks. One day near the end he gave me a telephone number.

He said, "Look, if anything should happen to me you call this number. This man back there, he's my friend. He'll take care of all the arrangements and see that I'm buried properly."

In the spring he passed away. I called his friend like I'd promised. They put him on a train and I rode with him to attend his funeral.

When we arrived, the valley and mountains were beautiful, just like he'd said. At the funeral home that night his friends kept coming in. He's no stranger here, I thought.

I was talking to his friend who had made all the funeral arrangements and asked him if he would show me his land that I had heard him talk about so much.

I noticed a puzzled look on his face. "Land," he said. "He didn't have any land."

I said, "Yes, he said there was a winding road running nearby and a river not too far away. Oh, yes, he talked of a beautiful mountain to the east and

you could see the sun come up over it."

Then he seemed to understand what I was talking about. He smiled and said, "Yes, I know where it is. I'll take you there early in the morning before the funeral."

The next morning early we were on our way. He turned off on a winding road. I noticed the green fields and cattle grazing and, down over the road, like a gorge, I could see a quiet, peaceful river.

I thought, this is it. We're getting close. Then he turned into a cemetery. Why is he stopping here?

We got out and walked over to a fresh-dug grave.

He looked at me and said, "Here's where we'll bury him today. That's his father and mother there. He'll rest beside them."

I looked around. What a peaceful place. I could hear the birds singing. Across the fields the cattle were grazing and in the distance a farmer was plowing his land. From a nearby house I could hear a little boy talking to his mother. "Mamma, how come, if that man has been gone so long, they bring him back here to bury him?"

"Well, honey, he was born and raised here in the valley and these mountains are home to him. It's like a Homecoming."

"Mamma, look! Is the sun coming out of that mountain?"

"No, baby, it just looks that way." I looked East and there was the beautiful mountain with the sun coming up. I turned and looked at his friend.

He smiled and nodded. "Yes," he said, "this is his plot of land and today is his Homecoming."

## ANGUS



"Hey, Slim," he said, motioning with his hand for me to come over to the booth where he was drinking Falstaff with some friends. "Don't you live at Dead Man's Curve on the Harlan Road?"

"Yes, I do," I answered.

"What time you going home?" he asked.

"Oh, around Midnight, when everything closes up."

"That figures," he said. "How about giving me a ride when you get ready to go. I live just across the mountain from you; in Kentucky."

"Sure will," I answered. "Most likely I'll be up the street in the poolroom, so look for me there at Midnight."

I had seen him many times before on Saturday night in St. Charles, Virginia. Harlan County, Kentucky was a dry county and many of its citizens crossed over into Lee County to drink and raise a little cain on Saturday nights.

He was a big, blond, fair-skinned man with an easygoing manner. I had heard quite a lot about him.

His wife, Nora, didn't approve of his Saturday nights in St. Charles where he always managed to drink too much, but she always left the porch light on for him, and helped him get in bed. His name was Angus. He was in his early forties and had a teenage daughter that I had heard was the prettiest girl in Kentucky or anywhere else.

I had never seen her and thought this might be my chance. I had been told that he didn't want his daughter to marry anyone from that neck of the woods. He wanted something better for her in life; someone more refined. Many stories were told of how he had outwitted many of the young men who had tried to win her hand.

About midnight he walked into the poolroom carrying a paper bag which contained a quart bottle. Just something for the road, I thought. "About ready, Slim?" he asked.

"Yes, let's go."

No sooner had we got in the car than he opened the bottle and took a long swig from it. "You take me on across the mountain to my house and I'll pay you for it," he said.

"Okay," I agreed.

He talked and took several swigs from the bottle as we drove along but by the time I pulled to the side of the road at his house he was sound asleep. I woke him and asked if he could make it up the hill. All the houses around there seemed to sit on a hill.

"Shore can, Shilm, shore can. Whash you think, I cain't walk?" He got out and held on to the car for a couple of minutes. Finally, he turned and headed himself toward the house.

He completely missed the little foot-bridge that spanned the creek and went sloshing through the water, mumbling about how cold it was. The porch

light lit up the hill and I watched him stumble, crawl, and mumble as he finally reached the steps.

He crawled up the steps, stood up and staggered to the door. It opened and I seen his wife take him by the arm, no doubt relieved that he had finally arrived home in one piece.

It got to be a regular thing on Saturday nights.

"Slim, will you take me home?"

"Yes, Angus, after everything closes."

I still hadn't been able to see his daughter and began to wonder if I ever would. Then, one Saturday night he said, "Slim, how about coming over next Saturday morning and taking my wife and daughter to town to do some shopping? I'll pay you for it."

"Okay, Angus, glad to. I'll be there."

I got there early Saturday morning. In fact, so early that I had to wait till they got ready to go.

Angus showed me around the place. He had a little garden. "Ain't got too much time to keep the weeds out," he said, "after working all week at the mine."

He had about a half acre fenced in with eight-foot poultry wire for his chickens and five goats. Two of the goats were standing on top of the small building in the center of the fenced-in space. "That's Lonnie and Buck," he said. "Buck's a mean old critter."

He called the others by name: Jerk, Effie and Sarah. I could see that he was fond of his goats.

We walked back around to the front porch and what I seen on the porch swing stopped me dead in my tracks. There was, without doubt, the prettiest girl in all the whole world.

She took after her mother; long black hair, high cheek bones, about five feet, eight inches tall, with everything in all the right places.

Angus nodded toward her and said, "That's my daughter, Trish." I kept staring at her without a word. I couldn't speak.

"This is Slim, Trish. He's from over in Virginia."

Angus didn't go to town with us. I guess he wanted to save all his energy for Saturday night.

Trish sat in the middle next to me. The beauty of her and that wonderful aroma of perfume made me feel somewhat giddy and I wanted to touch her so bad but didn't dare for fear of spoiling things.

I waited in the car while they were shopping and, luck would have it, Trish returned before her mother. After some small talk I asked her if she would like to go to the movie.

"We can take your mother home and come back to town," I said.

"Sure, I would love to but I'll have to ask Mother," she answered.

I could hardly wait for her to ask her mother. I was sure she would say it was O.K. so I was disappointed when her mother said, "No, not today. Next Saturday would be alright. Saturday afternoon only and be home by six."

I put on my best face for the remainder of the trip. I wanted to impress



her mother that I was a nice, decent person.

After dropping them off I crossed the mountain back into Virginia, bubbling over. Here I had done the impossible according to all that I had heard. Nobody else had been able to take the hand of Angus' daughter. Now, just after our first meeting she will be in my arms a week from today.

I burst into song as I rolled down the Virginia side of the mountain. It's a week away but its worth waiting for!

\* \* \* \* \*

My spirits were high as I drove across the mountain into Kentucky. I thought about the past week, with my help the word had got out that I had a date with Angus' daughter.

"I hear you have a date with Angus' daughter, Slim," one fellow said.

"That's right. Come Saturday she'll be in my arms," I answered.

He looked at his friend and winked. "I wouldn't bet on it, Slim. I wouldn't bet on it."

"Well, now, you just wait and see. It's all cut and dried and nothing can stop it," I said.

"Where you taking her?" he asked.

"To the movie at St. Charles; the matinee," I answered.

"Oh, I see," he said. "You have to have her home 'fore dark."

"That's right," I said. "But just give me time; I'll have things going my way before you know it."

"Does Angus know about it?"

I was getting riled at his questioning and the smirk on his face. "I don't know if Angus knows about it and frankly, I don't care 'cause there ain't nothing he can do about it, anyway." "O.K., Slim. Good luck. You're shore gonna need it."

I parked at the foot of the hill. I was at least an hour early but after sitting there for about ten minutes I decided to go on up to the house and wait on the porch till Trish was ready to go.

Just as I crossed the foot bridge I seen Angus walking down the hill toward me. "Morning, Slim," he said. "You're early. Trish ain't ready yet so how about taking me down to the store. I'm out of cigarettes."

"Sure, Angus. Glad to." We got in the car and started out.

"I tell you what Slim, turn off at that road coming up ahead. There's a place up there a piece thats closer than the store."

I turned to the right and drove about a mile when Angus said, "Right there, Slim; pull in there." I parked in front of a big barn-like building.

There were several cars parked outside and a group of young men standing by one of them seemed to be paying special attention to my car as soon as they

seen the Virginia tags.

"Come on in, Slim. You've got plenty of time; I'll buy you a cold drink."

"I'll just wait, Angus."

"No, no, come on Slim," he said.

I got out and followed him through the open door. Some of the young men nodded to him and had words of greeting that I could not hear over the noise of the big speaker mounted above the door that was blaring out the music from the juke box. Once in the door I noticed how dark it was inside; the only windows were in the back next to the woods.

One wall was lined with booths, each with a juke box selector mounted to the wall which gave out a little light over the table. In the back a counter, loaded with jars of pickles, pickled pigs feet and pickled eggs, ran half way across the building.

About a dozen stools lined the counter. At this time of day most of them were empty but I was sure that by late afternoon this place would be packed. Behind the counter, alongside the window on the wall, were little shelves filled with cigarettes.

Back in the corner stood a big coffee maker and a grill. A lady with a sweatband around her head and a towel draped over her shoulders was tending to grease-popping hamburgers.

We sat down at the counter and a big, overalled man with a toothpick stuck in his mouth came over and greeted Angus. Angus got his cigarettes. The man went to the cold drink box, reached down in the water and pulled out two cokes, wiped them dry on a towel, opened them at the opener attached to the box and sat them down before us.

"Slim, this is Bart," Angus said. "Bart, this is Slim from over in Virginia."

Bart rolled his toothpick from one side of his mouth to the other as he looked at me. "Virginia, eh," he growled. "Over in Apple Butter Country." That was a derogatory term that some Kentuckians used against someone from Virginia.

"You got any good stuff today, Bart?" Angus asked.

"Shore have," Bart answered. "The best that can be made."

"Well, I better take a pint along with me," Angus said.

Bart walked over to the open window, bent over and reached down to the ground. He straightened up, turned and walked over to the cold drink box with the pint in his hand. He took the towel that was hanging from the box and wiped the dirt, from where it had been hid in the wet leaves, from the bottle. He sat the bottle before us and Angus laid down a dollar.

Angus opened it and turned to me. "How about it, Slim? This is good stuff."

"No, Angus. I never could drink moonshine."

"You know better than that, Angus," Bart said. "All these people from Virginia can drink is that three-two beer they sell over there. They don't know what good likker is."

Bart pushed two glasses before us and Angus poured some in his and drank it without so much as the expression changing on his face. I pushed his hand away when he was about to put some in my glass.

"I tell you, Angus, I can't drink that stuff."

He reached for my half-finished Coke, poured it in my glass, added a good portion from the pint and handed it to me. "There now, go ahead and taste it. Go on, just taste it. You'll see it ain't half bad."

I picked up the glass and glanced up at Bart. "He cain't drink it, Angus. You're wasting yore breath," he said. "The onlyist thing he can drink is that three-two beer that they have over there in Apple Butter Country."

That did it! I had been ridiculed enough so with sweaty hands I held on to the glass, lifted it to my mouth and tasted. I was surprised at the taste. It didn't taste bad at all. It really does something for the Coke I thought as I tilted my head and drank it all down.

Bart stood staring at me for a full minute before the grin started to come. He shook his head and said, "I didn't think he had it in him, Angus."

Suddenly it hit me that there seemed to be some kind of pact between them but I pushed it from my mind as Bart sat another Coke before us.

"Don't you think we better go now, Angus?" I asked.

"Just one more drink, Slim," he answered. "Just one more."

While he mixed the drink I looked around. There was no more than a dozen people in the place. In the far corner booth four men were playing poker. The booth next to them was occupied by three men sharing a pint and eating pigs' feet.

The booth nearest to the counter was taken by a tall fellow wearing tight britches, cowboy shirt and a baseball cap turned backwards on his head. As I watched he walked across the floor to the other wall where the big Rock-Ola juke box sat, lit up like a neon sign.

Angus slid my drink across and said, "Drink up, Slim. Don't get nervous; Trish won't be ready to go for at least another hour."

We finished the drink and Angus bought another pint. "Just something for the road," he said.

Between numbers on the juke box, the only time you could hear, someone from the poker game hollered at Angus. He looked at me. "I'll go play a couple hands, Slim. We got plenty of time."

He mixed me another drink and that's when I noticed that he was giving my glass a lot more than he was his. But I brushed it off as just good-hearted, old Angus.

I watched Angus cross the dance floor and take his place among the poker players. I was surprised at how my attitude had changed in so short a time. Just a few minutes ago I had been uneasy and worried about this place and everyone in it.

I watched the fellow with the baseball cap on backwards as he ambled across to the jukebox, dropped his money in and made his selections, backed off about six steps, leaned to one side as the selector carried the record and put it in place, raised his right arm over his head and started into a wild,

stomping dance just as the music started.

The next two numbers were slow and he would glide across the whole dance floor holding his make-believe partner. No women were in the place but I was sure it would be full of them tonight. He's getting in practice, I thought.

He came back to his booth, poured a drink from his bottle and motioned for me to come over to his booth. I went over and he mixed me a drink.

"You kin to Angus?" he asked.

"No, just a friend," I answered.

"You know his daughter?"

"Yes," I said.

"Pretty, ain't she?"

"She sure is."

"Won't do you any good," he said. "Angus will see to that."

"I got a date with her today. Gonna take her to the movie this afternoon," I said.

"Zat right. Then how come you still hanging around here. You better get a move on."

"Oh, I got time," I said.

I watched as he moved away to the juke box again. He did his wild stomping number, followed by the two slow numbers and returned to the booth. We finished his pint and I followed him to the juke box.

As he backed away with his right arm over his head, I found myself doing the same thing. When the needle hit the tune of "Down Yonder," we faced off and went wildly into the stomping routine, followed by the two slow tunes. I held my make-believe partner just as close as he held his.

What a difference a little time will make, I thought. When we first came in here I was sure this man was crazy but now I find out he has been the only one having any fun up until now. Now there are two of us *having fun*.

I don't know how long I danced around the floor for I lost all track of time.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. "Let's go, Slim."

As we pulled out on the road I felt extremely happy thinking of the afternoon ahead of me with Trish at the movie. I started singing, everything seemed so perfect and simple, even my driving.

"Take it easy, Slim. Take it easy. Watch out for that curve ahead."

"O.K., Angus. Don't worry, I'm alright." I could see two people sitting in the porch swing as Angus pushed me up the steps. Trish is ready, I thought. I got here just in time.

Everything seemed to be turning around me and I kept reaching for something to hold on to. I leaned against the wall and slid down to the floor in a sitting position.

I seen two pair of legs pass by me and heard the screen door slam. That must have been Nora and Trish. Wonder why Trish went in the house. She should be ready by now.

"You just take it easy, Slim. You'll be okay in a little while."

I turned my head toward the voice and could see his face floating there

and smiling down at me.

I awoke with the sun in my face. My head was throbbing and my stomach was on fire. I couldn't bear to look at the sun so I covered my eyes with my arm.

Finally I sat up and looked around. I was still on the porch and it was dark. It wasn't the sun that had bothered my eyes but the porch light. I sat there for a long time not knowing what time of night it was.

All the lights were out in the house and there wasn't a sound anywhere. I slid off the porch and headed down the hill.

I washed my face in the creek and finally began to realize what had happened. I had played right into Angus' hands. He had completely outwitted me. In fact, he had crushed me.

There was no song in my heart as I crossed the mountain into Virginia. The one thing that was going through my mind was, "I wouldn't count on it, Slim. I wouldn't count on it."

\* \* \* \* \*

It had been three months since Angus had outwitted me. Three months of unmerciful verbal abuse.

"Hey, Slim, how's your love life with Angus' daughter?"

"I hear you're the best dancer in this part of the country."

"Angus says you can really hold yore likker. How come you don't take him home anymore?"

Everywhere I went, especially in St. Charles on Saturday nights, the never-ending ribbing went on. I seen Angus just about every weekend but I kept my distance from him. It was pretty obvious that he was getting the word out on our visit to the roadhouse and was truly enjoying my discomfort.

I tried to put it out of my mind as just another of my mistakes. In spite of the advice that I received from others I had gone ahead and been foolish. Now I should just forget the whole thing, including Trish. But I couldn't get rid of the haunting feeling that I should go and apologize to Trish and her mother. I felt that in spite of what Angus had done I was responsible for my actions and should pay them a visit and express my regrets. Then, with time, I was sure that I would feel better about the situation.

So, on a hot August morning I parked the car and climbed the hill. I could see Angus at the fence corner out back of the house, looking at his goats. I thought this a good streak of luck; at least I wouldn't have to face him if he would just stay put.

I climbed the steps to the porch, tapped lightly on the screen door and waited. It seemed like forever that I couldn't hear a sound. The sweat broke

out and rolled down my face; my palms were wet; I could hear my heartbeat and could hardly breathe.

Just as I was about to turn and leave from fright, Nora came to the door followed by Trish. She smiled and motioned me inside.

I sat down across from where they were seated on the couch. All this time I hadn't uttered one word, not even a greeting. Words just wouldn't come. Finally, Nora said, "Good to see you again. Where have you been so long?"

As I sat there with Trish smiling, suddenly it was just like a bad dream from which I had wakened. It wasn't there after all. Then it came easy. "Well, I've been around. Been aiming on coming around to tell you about the way I acted the last time I was here. I sure acted like a bum and I'm real sorry about it."

"Oh, that's alright," Nora said, as Trish looked at me and smiled. "We all make mistakes."

I loosened up even more and we sat there for better than an hour talking as if nothing ever happened. As I got up to leave I said something that was a complete about-face to my intentions when I came in. I had meant this to be an apology and nothing more. Apologize, leave here, and put Trish out of my mind.

"Trish, would you consider going to the movie with me next Saturday afternoon?" Then looking at her mother, I said, "With your approval. I promise to stay out of trouble and I won't be foolish again."

They looked at each other and smiled. "All right," Nora answered. "But don't you take Angus for any cigarettes."

"Don't you worry," I said, as they laughed. "I won't ever do that again."

As I started down the hill I looked around the corner of the house. Angus was still admiring his goats. He looked up and waved. I hurried along afraid that he might start a conversation but he seemed content with his goats.

As I crossed the mountain back into Virginia, the agony of the past three months was suddenly reduced to a comic happening that I could laugh about. Now I was looking ahead to another chance with Trish come next Saturday. Angus had tried to spoil things for us but I had outsmarted him. I burst into song: *'Everything's alright with you and me, Trish. We've overcome it all. We're going to walk hand in hand. Angus can't stop us now.'*

I made up the lines as I drove along, trying them with two or three different tunes. They all sounded good to me.

\* \* \* \* \*

As I climbed the hill, I thought of the past week. It had flown by in spite of the remarks that were directed at me.



"Seen Angus lately, Slim? Ain't you gonna let him take you to the dance hall again? You'll get rusty without practice; they tell me you're the best dancer around."

"When you gonna take his daughter to the movie?"

I would just smile and keep my mouth shut. How surprised they're gonna be when they find out that I'm taking her to the movie today and that, in the end, I have outsmarted Angus and everything turns out in my favor.

These were my thoughts as I approached the house. I was startled when Angus came around the corner of the house with a roll of gauze bandage in his hand and a small container of what smelled like turpentine.

"Hello, Slim. Glad you're here. Trish ain't ready yet and I wonder if you'll give me a hand. Old Buck's got a gash on one of his hind legs. I need to get a bandage on it."

"Oh, sure, Angus." I was somewhat relieved because I had been thinking all week that maybe he might just decide to tell me to shove off and not come back again. I followed him around the house to the goat pen. He opened the gate; we went in and he closed it behind us.

Lonnie, Jerk, Effie and Sarah were near the gate and came up close to us and began to nudge Angus. He rubbed and scratched their heads. Buck was standing facing us about thirty feet away.

I remembered what Angus had said about him on my first visit here. "A mean old cuss," he had said. Buck sure looked the part now.

Angus walked slowly toward him then moved to one side as if to pass him by. When he was even with his head, he gave a quick leap with arms outstretched. He put one arm around Buck's neck and grabbed a horn with his other hand. Old Buck kicked and twisted his head for a minute or so but soon quieted down; truly no match for the strong arms of Angus.

"Now, come here, Slim, and get the same hold on him that I've got. Then I'll turn loose and put a bandage on his leg while you hold him." I grabbed a horn and put my arm around his neck.

"You got him, Slim?"

"Yes," I answered, just as he released his hold.

Out of the corner of my eye I seen Angus dash across to a fence post to where he had left the turpentine and bandage. I was holding my own with Buck until Angus got behind him.

At the time I didn't realize what he did. I did know that turpentine was widely used for fresh cuts and bruises in those days. I had also heard talk of rubbing turpentine under a dog's tail and he would run like crazy. I'm sure that's what Angus did to Old Buck because all of a sudden he went crazy.

I lost my grip on his horn just as Angus hollered, "Hold him, Slim, hold him!"

I couldn't get a hold on the horn again so I put both arms around his neck. Buck started kicking, bucking, sunfishing and just about every other thing that a bucking horse would do.

Angus kept yelling, "Hang on, Slim, hang on!"

Buck galloped around the lot with me hanging on. Finally I lost my hold

and started running for the gate. There was no way out through the poultry wire that was backed by five strands of barbed wire on the outside. Angus was already outside the gate. In fact, I think that's where he was most of the time he was yelling at me to hold on. He made no attempt to open the gate for me until I started screaming at him. I just barely made it through as Old Buck buried his head and horns in the wire mesh as Angus closed the gate behind me.

All the commotion had brought Trish and Nora to the back porch.

There I stood with my clean shined shoes all scuffed up, dust all over my pants, my best Sunday white shirt soiled and wet with sweat. Angus reached me a towel and looked away but I could see that he was grinning.

I wiped the sweat from my face and arms before I noticed the odor. To this day I believe Angus used that towel for wiping his goats. I combed my hair and looked up to see that Trish and Nora had disappeared inside the house.

I walked to the front of the house and Trish was waiting on the porch. She came down the steps and we walked to the car.

At first she sat close to me on the seat but before we got to town, she had moved all the way against the door on the passenger side. While I was getting the tickets, I felt like all eyes were on me. The darkness inside the theater was a relief.

The usher seated us and it didn't take long before all the seats around us were full. An old miner came in with a bag of groceries and a long-handled broom. I stood up to let him in but he had been visiting the beer joints so he managed to step on my feet and the broom handle caught Trish on the head before he finally got seated.

There was no air conditioning; just overhead fans to push the hot, August air around. I began to notice the people in front of me turning around to look in my direction while the ones on either side were leaning away. I heard whispers behind us about *'that awful odor.'*

Trish didn't look happy at all and I noticed she was leaning away from me, too. Pretty soon, the people in front of us moved leaving four empty seats. One by one, the seats emptied alongside of us and behind us.

The old miner was the last one to move, struggling with his bag of groceries and mumbling something about, *'smells like a damn goat,'* while I dodged the broom handle as he walked across my feet.

Over the years I had smelled some strange odors in the St. Charles theater and I think most everybody had got used to them but I guess the goat odor was a little too much. Just when I thought that now there was no one close to us maybe everything would be all right Trish whispered that she felt sick and wanted to go home.

On the way home she said very little. Neither did I. When she got out of the car I told her I was sorry things had turned out like they did. I don't think she heard a word I said.

I could see Angus swinging back and forth in the porch swing as if nothing ever happened. At that time I could have killed him.

As I drove across the mountain back into Virginia, I could hear Angus

hollering, "Hang on, Slim, hang on!" I knew that this was final; he would have to find someone else to play his games because I'm no match for him. I had gone up against him twice and the score was two to nothing, his favor.

So he can have his daughter as far as I'm concerned. I want no part of Angus, never again!

\* \* \* \* \*

"Hey, Slim, how about giving me a ride home tonight?"

I looked around to see Angus standing there grinning.

"Okay, Angus, after everything closes," I answered. I watched him walk down the street and disappear into one of the beer joints.

It was July, eleven months since he had pulled the goat trick on me and completely weaned me away from his daughter. I had kept away from him but was not surprised that he had asked me to take him home again. As time had passed I could see that he held no grudge against me and wanted to remain friends.

I had given a lot of thought over the past eleven months about Angus and why he didn't get tough with the young men and tell them outright to stay away from his daughter.

There had been another victim since me that had took some of the attention and abuse from the goat incident. I had come to the conclusion that he wanted to give you a sporting chance; then like a Field General he would plot his strategy carefully, win his battle, enjoy his victory and move on to the next one.

As I said before I had stayed away from him and vowed never to have anything to do with him in any way. But at the same time I was secretly hoping to get even with him in one way or the other. In fact, I already had a plan for this very occasion that had run through my mind many times since the goat incident.

As soon as Angus got out of sight I headed straight for "Shouns" Drugs. I purchased a tube of bright red lipstick and a bottle of the wildest smelling perfume that the clerk could find. I put them away in the car and waited for Angus at the pool room.

Along about midnight he staggered in the door with his ever-familiar 'one for the road' hid away in a brown paper bag. "Ready, Shlim?"

"Yeah, let's go Angus."

He took a swig from the bottle and settled back in the seat and began to snore. I reached over and swiped the lipstick across his shirt collar. I waited a few seconds and ran it across one side of his neck and cheek. He moved his head and mumbled something that I couldn't make out.

After a bit I swiped it across his lips, making sure that I used enough pressure to get enough on the first time. This caused him to raise up snorting

and mumbling, "Whas th matter? Whas th Hells going on, Shlim?"

"Nothing, Angus. We'll soon be home," I answered. He took another drink from the bottle and was soon asleep again.

I opened the perfume and dabbed his clothing in several spots. Pretty soon the car smelled like it was full of girls. In the moonlight I could see Angus twitching his nose from side to side. Finally he sat straight up and looked over at me and then, without a word, he looked in the back seat. Satisfied that there was no one else in the car he took another swig from the bottle, gave me a puzzled look, settled back in the seat and began to snore again.

The porch light was on as usual when I stopped at the foot of the hill. Angus got out and stood there holding on to the side of the car. "Can you make it alright, Angus?"

"Shore can, Shlim. Whas ya mean? Shore I can make it." He aimed himself for the foot bridge and staggered off.

He made it across the bridge without any trouble because he had decided some time ago to put some hand rails on the bridge after falling off a couple of times on cold winter mornings. I watched him climb the hill and struggle up the steps to the porch.

The door opened and Nora took him by the arm and the door closed behind them. I sat there for a few minutes straining to hear some kind of commotion coming from the house. I knew that it would be just a matter of minutes before Nora would see the lipstick after smelling the perfume.

The door suddenly swung open and Angus was pushed out on the porch. Nora stood in the door shouting at him as he slowly slid down the wall to a sitting position. She closed the door with a loud bang as Angus stretched out on the porch floor.

I sat there and laughed. Angus was gonna wake up with the porch light shining in his face. The same fate that he caused me some months ago. Too bad he don't have to sleep with his goats, I thought.

As I drove across the mountain into Virginia I kept repeating, "I have finally won over Angus; the score is two to one, still in his favor, but this could be devastating. A home run that he will never forget!"

Needless to say I kept completely away from Angus after that.

Trish went away to college at Berea, Kentucky. When work became slack at the coal mines, I went away to Chicago to work.

Years later, in Nineteen Hundred Seventy-Eight, I stopped at a restaurant in Middlesboro, Kentucky while on a visit back to Virginia. As soon as I seen him, I knew it was Angus. Him and Nora were having lunch.

I went over and talked with them for some time.

They had just returned from New York where they had been to visit Trish and her family. Trish had married off well and now moved around in the corporate and social circles. From what I could gather, Angus wasn't happy with the situation at all and felt completely out of place around the bridge parties and country clubs.

Just before I said good-bye he looked at me with a kind of hurt in his

eyes and asked, "Slim, did you put that lipstick and perfume on me that night?"

"Sure did, Angus."

"I told you, Nora, I told you so."

I looked at Nora and she was smiling. "I knew it all the time," she said.

As I drove away I was thinking about what a very unhappy man Angus was about the way Trish and her way of life were so far removed from his. What a shame after all the battles he won trying to protect her and, in the end, losing the war!

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## COUNTRY BOY

Born and raised a country boy. Never knew his daddy who died when he was a baby. He grew up in the shadow of his mother. She done by him the best she could.

He went into the service and served his country well but, unfortunately, at a time when soldiers were no longer appreciated. After his discharge from the Army he looked to the big city, with its masses, crime and glitter, for a job. He never was able to get out of the rut that he had put himself in.

He married for hopes of things getting better. It didn't work out. Nothing seemed to go right. Finally sickness sent him to the hospital where he wasted away. I've often wondered if he just gave up; not caring to go on with his life of despair.

In death not one of the big cities millions claimed him; not one head bowed, no wreaths hung on any door, not a single tear was shed. No one claimed his body.

Back in the Cumberland Mountains of Virginia, his birthplace and home of his heart, a couple of people made it possible to bring him back home. There on a hillside, near where he was born, a small crowd gathered for one last look at the country boy.

They laid him gently in the ground near his mamma; the only one to show him real love through his troubled stay here on earth. She soothed his cries and kissed his hurts and wrapped her arms around his emptiness.

A few in the crowd cried. They never bothered before; why now? It's too late.

He's home again and it's springtime. The mourning dove moves closer to its mate. The sun is warming the wild flowers from their sleep. The grass will grow greener around his grave.

Yes, all is well. The land has reclaimed one of its own. The country boy finally made it home.

With our last thoughts of him in prayer,  
Who among us can say that God wasn't there?  
And reached his heart while there alone,  
Whispered, come son, we're going home.  
So fill the air with birds  
And songs, pretty things,  
Free his soul and give it wings,  
Let it fly with angel bands,  
Till its resting in God's hands,  
The country boy is home again.



## THE DRIVERLESS PONTIAC



The year was 1946 or '47, just after World War Two. Jake's Place in St. Charles, Virginia was the hangout for most of the young men in that area of Lee County, including myself. Me and my buddy, Clarence, would occupy a booth there about two or three times a week until closing time, Twelve O'Clock--Midnight.

We told, and listened to, Tall War Tales, completely exaggerated, as we drank beer and ate an occasional hamburger.

One summer night we went to our cars to go home. I had an old 1937 Ford that had just one speed--worn out and slow. Clarence drove a 1939 Pontiac Straight Eight--fast, and that's the way he liked to drive it.

We lived about a mile apart on the Harlan Road. He would usually go ahead of me and wait in front of my house and we would sit in one of the cars and talk some more.

On this night he pulled out ahead of me as usual but this time I noticed something different; he had a passenger. I could see someone's arm resting on the door of the passenger side. This worried me for fear that someone had been hiding in the car and was forcing him to drive at gunpoint.

I also noticed that he was going at a slower pace and I could easily keep up. We traveled about two miles and I became more nervous and worried. Then, to make things worse, I discovered that I couldn't see Clarence.

I drove right up on his bumper and switched my bright lights on; there was no driver. I dimmed my lights and dropped back, only to discover that the passenger had disappeared. Now the car had no one in it and it began to pick up speed. Soon I lost sight of his tail lights and didn't see him anymore until I got to my house. He was parked there waiting for me as always.

He got out with a sheepish grin on his face. He had fooled me by sitting on the passenger side and reaching across to the steering wheel with his left hand and using his left foot for the gas pedal and brake. But how he completely disappeared under the steering wheel and drove as fast as he did I will never know.

About two weeks later a young man that neither of us had ever seen before came over to our booth in Jake's Place and introduced himself. He lived just across the mountain in Harlan County, Kentucky. Harlan County was dry at that time so a few of their young men would come across into Virginia to drink beer and relate their war experiences.

This young fellow had some especially tall tales to tell since he had served in the Marine Corps in the war and I'm sure that most of them were true. We sat and talked until closing time.

We all had to travel the same road going home. He left just ahead of us so he didn't see either of our cars and didn't know what kind we were driving. I noticed that Clarence seemed in an awful hurry as he roared away. I wondered at the time if he was up to one of his crazy stunts.

About three miles away, on the Harlan Road, I rounded a curve to see the young man's car parked alongside the road. I rolled to a stop, got out and went up to his car. He was sitting under the wheel, deathly pale and shaking. I could see that he was either sick or scared to death.

"What's the matter, Buddy?"

"Di-di-did you see that car?" he said.

"No," I answered. "What car?"

"It's an old black car, Pontiac, I think. The thing is flying and nobody's driving it."

"Nobody's driving it. How can that be? A car can't drive itself."

"I don't know," he said. "But it went past me about six times, almost hit me, weaving all over the road. I tell you there ain't nobody in that car. It waits on the side of the road for me to pass so it can buzz past me again. The last time it done it, I just pulled over and stopped. I'm too nervous to drive anyway; it's waiting up the road somewhere for me to go by again."

"OK, Buddy," I said, "I'll drive behind you to the Kentucky Line. It's only about two more miles."

We drove about a mile up the road and out of nowhere headlights came up in my rearview mirror. Like a flash that old Pontiac roared by, weaving back and forth from one shoulder to the other with gravel flying in all directions. I checked it out real good before it got out of sight and sure enough, there was no driver.

I escorted the young fellow to the Kentucky Line. We stopped and talked for a couple of minutes as he sat there shaking. I didn't tell him the secret of the driverless Pontiac. I wanted to tell because I felt sorry for him but I decided to wait until I seen him again.

Months and years went by and I never seen that young man again. I guess after what he went through that night he figured all the beer in Virginia wouldn't be worth the trip over the mountain again.

Somewhere in Kentucky, I can hear him now --

An old Marine Corp veteran telling his children and grandchildren about his experiences in World War Two and about that old Pontiac in Virginia flying past him without a driver. He'll probably say: "And I ain't been back there since!"

## THINGS I MISS

They say Time marches on. Well, I think it's more like a fast train and each time it passes it takes something with it. I got to thinking on this the other day and came up with a long list of things that Time has taken, and that I miss.

With each passing day, I add something else that has disappeared on Time's fast train. Remember the old cold drink boxes where you had to reach in and get your hands wet? Well, I miss that.

I miss cars with running boards filled with miners dinner buckets. And I miss rumble seats.

I miss the days when just about everybody around would sit up with the sick all night long and help in any way they could. And I miss when someone said 'come and eat dinner with us,' and really meant it.

I miss cow bells and men plowing the land with a team of mules.

I miss Lee County, Virginia and the hills I grew up in. I miss that large family of mine and I miss not being as close as we used to be.

I miss the stiroffs where molasses were made and the young people would come and play games, mostly Post Office.

I miss going to the show and seeing the Saturday Westerns where, if you seen one you've seen them all. Shucks, I'd like to see them all again.

I miss the taxi stand at Green's Cafe in Pennington Gap, where you could find Walter Keith, Henry Perkins, Luther and Tip Hughes, Henry Newman, Chauncy Rhea and others discussing the baseball games. They could keep you posted on the team standings, especially on the Yankees and Cardinals.

I miss St. Charles the way it used to be; it's bustle and brashness on a Saturday night.

I miss the kindness of little Clyde Copeland.

I miss the old steam engines that hauled away the best coal and literally carried the town away and scattered its people all over the country.

I miss Stone Creek at Martins Store; the young boys in a rotten apple fight. John Cooper's loud laugh, the soft voice of my grandmother and Ebbie's round-face smile.

I miss Elk Knob, Grandpa, Grandma Hobbs and the others of that family that have passed on. They rest down in the flats with Elk Knob standing over them.

I especially miss my dad and his papa and mamma.

I miss my old buddy, Clarence, and the way we were when we were young.

I miss kerosine lamps and, believe it or not, outside toilets with wasps flying around!

Yes, I have a long, growing list of things that I miss. And, then, there's some things I'll never miss.

I'll never miss airplanes, television, super highways or the cars that travel on them. And who could ever miss computers?

Yes, Time marches on and takes a lot with it. It leaves me a little older and a whole lot sadder; missing the things that I used to take for granted.

## I DON'T BELIEVE IN HAINTS



As a kid I heard my share of scary tales of cemeteries and haunted houses or, as we out in the country called them, hainted houses. Haints.

I have heard grownups say that they didn't believe in such things and in the same breath tell of the time they were going by this cemetery on a cold dark night and out of nowhere a light appeared floating over the graves and of the mournful sounds they could hear.

I was told by almost everyone that there were no such things and in my mind I knew there wasn't, but I was scared anyway.

I went 'coon hunting with Earl "Whippoorwill" Stapleton when I was about twelve years old. He was around twenty years old and was afraid of nothing that I knew of. We crossed the hill above our house and he would stop every little bit and cry out like a bobcat. He said he was trying to get a bobcat to answer.

Not only was I scared to death but I think the dogs were, too. I began to wonder if we were 'coon hunting or chasing bobcats. As we were passing the old Kirk cemetery way back where no one lived anymore, he reached out and grabbed me and yelled, "Do you believe in Haints?"

I jumped about ten feet in the air and hollered, "No, but I'm scared to death of them!"

When I was a teenager I would walk to church, a distance of about two miles. I was usually with a group of teenagers when we went to a prayer meeting at night. Once in a while one of the boys would go on ahead after the church service and cook up something to scare the rest of the group when they came by.

Mr. Baker's sawmill was about half way between the church and where most of us lived; he was building a house right at the road near the sawmill. The top floor was at road level and the first floor was under the hill below the road.

The framework, roof and walls were up but there were no windows or floors. He had laid loose boards down here and there on the top floor across the floor joists.

At the time, when someone died families couldn't afford anything fancy like vaults and caskets. They usually came to Mr. Baker to have him make a coffin for them. He didn't charge a lot for them and I'm sure he did it free of charge a number of times.

It got to where he would try and keep two or three made up ahead, of different sizes just so he wouldn't have to rush ahead making one when someone passed away. And in this unfinished house, on the top floor, is where he stored them.

I remember the times we boys would go in there on our way from church at night, sit on the boards that were laying across the floor joists with our feet

and legs dangling through the open floor. We would sit there and talk for long periods of time, never giving any thought to the coffins over against the wall. But if any one of us had been alone I'm sure it would have been a different story.

One night at church I got the idea to go on ahead and get in one of those coffins. I arrived at the house out of breath. The moon was shining bright so I had no trouble seeing the loose boards to walk on. When I was almost to the coffins I stopped to catch my breath.

The longer I stood there with the boards squeeking under my feet, the more I realized that I was getting more scared by the minute. I was ready to back out.

Finally, I decided to go ahead with my plan because it wouldn't be long until the other boys would be there. I could give them the scare of their lives.

I approached the coffin that I intended to get in and raised the lid. Well, of all the things that you have ever heard about like hair standing on end, skin crawling, butterflies, goosebumps, you name it, it all happened to me. There was a body already there! A low moaning sound came from the coffin!

I couldn't move for what seemed forever and when I did manage to move, did I ever move! I started running across the narrow path that the boards made over the open floor. I was almost to the door when I missed the boards and fell through to the floor below amongst lumber, sawdust, nails and roofing material.

I caught my shirt on a nail on the way down and it was ripped all the way down the back. I could see blood on my arm. One leg was under a pile of lumber and rolls of roofing that had fallen over when I hit them.

I just knew my back was broke and I couldn't move. I could see stars and hear bells. I also could hear that moaning sound from above and someone walking on the boards. I started pushing rolls of roofing and lumber off me with my free leg. I finally got my leg free and crawled over the building material to the open door.

I ran the creek bank in back of the house for some distance before climbing the bank back to the road. I ran as fast as I could go the rest of the way home, hearing that moaning sound every step of the way.

The next day, in broad daylight, I went back and peeked in at the coffins. There was no body there but the lid was still raised on that one coffin.

None of the boys or anyone else ever admitted to being in that coffin but I am satisfied that is what happened. To this day I am scared to death around old cemeteries at night.

All the money in Lee County, Virginia, couldn't make me walk by that old Kirk graveyard there in the woods at night.

So you ask, "Do you believe in Haints?"

My answer will be, "No sir, but I'm scared to death of them!"

## HIS JOURNEY HOME

After twenty-five years on the radio every Sunday morning there in the Cumberland Mountains of Lee County, Virginia, the Lee Valley Quartet, due to health reasons of some of its members, has gone off the air. They sang the old-time gospel way, without musical instruments.

Like many other things, this way of singing is fading with time; giving way to more modern music or, progressive music, as some like to call it. I realize that change must come in almost everything but sometimes we seem to lose more than we gain.

The quartet was formed in 1953 at Pond View Baptist Church on Highway 58. The Reverend Cecil Evans was the main force behind the quartet for all these years. Cecil, along with Lillie Jones, are the only originals left.

George Cooper, Floyd Haun, Thurman Rogers, Roe Fanning, Hugh Bledsoe, Loran Parsons, Morris Fannon, Paul Lockart and Ralph Lawson are some of the singers that have been members of the quartet at one time or another. Their main sponsor over the years has been Ralph Robinette, who helped them in any way he could.

Cecil's voice broke several times on their last program. He said, "It's hard to give up after coming here every Sunday for twenty-five years." Yes, I can understand that Cecil, and you will be missed.

I remember Cecil was finishing grammar school at Pine Grove just as I was beginning. Life has never been easy for him.

As a young boy he walked behind a team and turning plow; as a young man he worked the coal mines for many years. He finally retired from Creech Bros. Supply Company.

He and his wife, Maxie, gave up a son in defense of our Country. What more can be asked of a man? How many of us take the time to give this some thought and appreciate the meaning of it?

Cecil wrote some songs that will be with us long after he has gone. One of them is entitled, "On My Journey Home." One verse from it says:

"I'm on my way to a better country where  
All is Bliss and Beauty Rare.  
I'll leave behind all Earthly Sorrow,  
And live in Joy beyond compare."

Cecil's journey home started many years ago at Pine Grove Church. While standing outside the church one day, something moved him to go inside to the altar and, in his own words, "I shall never forget it."

His two sons and three daughters were on the final program. Sweet singers they are. They call themselves "The Messengers." Why not "Cecil's Messengers?"

Cecil said the Lee Valley Quartet would still be singing, health permitting, at churches over Lee County. In his own words, "I hope to see you



there, but if not, come on over to Heaven. I'll be there."

On my visits to Lee County through the years, I always made it a point to listen to the Lee Valley Quartet on Sunday mornings.

About five years ago I made out a list of people and things that I miss, mostly in Lee County. Now I have to add this to my long list of things that I miss.

I'm gonna miss that old time Gospel Singing.

I'm gonna miss Cecil Evans' version of "The Prodigal Son."

I'm gonna miss him always saying, "You need Jesus in your heart and go to church somewhere today."

Thanks, Cecil, for sharing these things with me on your journey home.

## FRITZIE

The year was 1956 and I was a night-shift supervisor in a plant in Chicago. It was a four-story building and I was responsible for all four floors including the security and cleaning people.

The company hired their own watchmen and, between their rounds every two hours, they doubled as cleaning people. One of the watchmen had been with the company for many years and usually worked the four to twelve shift.

He was from Germany but had lived in Chicago for many years. I loved to hear him talk with his heavy German accent mixed with American Big City slang.

He was short, about five feet four inches, and overweight. Hornrimmed glasses framed big, serious blue eyes and, except for a little hair above his ears and around the back of his neck, his head was bare. He wore a heavy, floor-length apron.

I can still see him making his rounds. You couldn't see his feet under the apron and it made it look like he was gliding along on roller skates. I could always tell when he was nearby from the wonderful aroma of the pipe tobacco he used.

His name was Fritz but, somewhere along the way, it had been changed to Fritzie. Most likely because of his size but it seemed to fit him better.

He was an outgoing, likeable person and through our many conversations, I learned much about him. His wife had died when their only child, a son, was a teenager. He had never remarried. He lived alone with his little dachshund, "Max," on the northwest side of Chicago.

He had two faults. Well, maybe they weren't faults. What I see as a fault may not look that way at all through the eyes of someone else. He, like many people I've known, for some reason think they have to be especially nice to the boss in addition to doing a good job.

He embarrassed me many times by bringing me apples or cakes or pies that he had baked while completely ignoring the other workers around me. At the same time he would stand and talk to me as if the others weren't there.

I don't believe his other fault was really his fault. I think it was something he couldn't control.

As he glided along you could hear him passing gas, or breaking wind, whichever you prefer. The sound of the gas along with all the keys that he would dangle from the big key ring he wore, seemed to have a rhythm to it.

He usually could control it when standing still except the times when he would get excited in a conversation. Many times while talking to him, I've seen him lose control. He would talk on as if nothing happened and I would muster up everything inside me to try and keep a straight face. There was one time that I failed to control myself when he was out of control and I don't believe he ever completely forgave me for it.

It was in October before the President's election. I met him in the hallway on his way back to his cleaning chores after making his rounds to key the stations.

He liked Ike and had told me so many times. On this night he was bubbling over to tell me what Ike had said in a speech that he had just heard on the radio. He had a habit of standing real close to you when he talked and, in my case, as tall as I am, he would throw his head back and look up at me.

As he was relating the speech with 'Ike said this' and 'Ike said that', he became real excited and began passing gas. Every time he would finish a sentence he would let off a barrage.

I stood it as long as I could and finally started backing up, only to have him follow, raving about Ike and passing gas even faster and louder, as if he were blasting Ike's opposition.

I could hold myself no longer. First I smiled, still trying to hold back the laughter but it became more difficult as he now had become more excited and was blasting away at will. I turned away and started laughing, completely out of control.

He walked around to face me again, waving his arms and yelling, "Wat's da matter? What's you laughing at? You tink dats funny, eh? Well, to Hell witcha. Go ahead and laugh," and, at the same time, he's still blasting away.

I leaned against the wall with tears running down my face from laughter as he stood there and blasted, waved and berated me. He finally went gliding down the hallway and left me there trying to regain my composure.

After that I would do everything possible to avoid a conversation with him but it seemed that he would do everything he could to get me in the same position. It was a lost cause for me to try to keep control of myself any more. His first blast would set me off and he would wind up blasting and berating at will.

After about two years, in 1958, I noticed he didn't glide down the hallways in a straight line anymore. He would weave from side to side and at a much slower pace than before. His age was telling on him. He was off sick more often and there were times when he came to work that I know he should have been home in bed.

One of these sick spells sent him to the hospital for a week. After he went home from the hospital and had been off from work for two months, his son called my superintendent and said that he would like for him to retire. Said he worried about him riding the bus and being out in all kinds of weather.

He said that he had talked to his father about it but so far, hadn't been able to convince him to retire. "In my estimation," he said, "You will probably have to force him to retire."

The superintendent and I talked it over and he asked if I would go out to Fritzie's house and tell him that we had decided for him to retire. I walked up to his neat little cottage and rang the doorbell.

He opened the door and stood there somewhat surprised, clinching his pipe between his teeth as he began to smile and beckon me in. We sat and talked for a while, as his little dog, "Max" sat with him on the couch. Finally, I asked him, "Fritzie, don't you think you should retire and enjoy yourself? You've worked hard all your life. You need to take it easy for a while."

"Oh, no! What's you mean? No, no, I'll be back to work next week."

I could see that I was getting nowhere, so I said, "Fritzie, we have decided that you should retire. We have already hired someone to take your place. I'm sorry, but I hope you understand."

He dropped his head for a full minute, as if to gather his thoughts. Then he looked at me and said, "Oh, yes, I understand. You just want to push me out, just like that, push me out."

"But that's alright. I own my little house here and I won't starve, cause I've saved all my life." Then he put his arm around his little dog as tears began to form in his big blue eyes. "We'll be alright, won't we, Max" No, don't you worry none about us. We'll be alright."

As I got up to leave I thought it strange, and was relieved at the same time, that he hadn't gone into one of his wind-breaking barrages. I had been worried about this, considering the task I had to perform.

He stood in the door with Max at his feet as I went down the walkway. When I reached the sidewalk he called out, "Wait a minute."

I turned just as he took his pipe from his mouth and held it high above his head and, at the same time he bent over and let go with one that could have been heard across the street.

"Now, go ahead and laugh," he said. "To Hell witcha. To Hell witcha."

Then he began to laugh, his belly was rolling and, with each roll, the blasting started in rhythm and Max stood between his legs, barking.

"Young man, you come back and see us sometime, you hear?" he said. "You hear? Stop in anytime."

I drove back to the factory thinking about how my day could start out so full of dread and end up with sunshine and hope. I felt so good that Old Fritzie was still my friend and back in tune again.

I began to laugh and noticed other drivers staring at me. "To Hell witcha," I yelled. "I'm gonna laugh anyway--"

## A MOTHER'S LOVE



A beautiful spring morning in May 1944. I was in a group of young men waiting for the bus to take us to Fort George G. Meade, Maryland, for induction in the Armed Services. Mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and girlfriends came to bid us goodbye.

As we filed on the old bus there were lots of tears shed. Most of us were only about eighteen years old and some had never spent the night away from home. We were at Fort Meade for only a few days, just long enough to be processed and assigned to various training camps around the country.

Myself and five others from Lee County, Virginia, were sent to Camp Blanding, Florida, for basic training. My buddy Clarence had tried to register on the same day that I did just so we could leave together. They refused to let him register and he had to go back a few days later on his birthday. But we were called to go on the same date anyway. Then there was Calvin, Jack, David and Charles.

After seventeen weeks of basic training in the hot, humid, snake-infested swamps of Camp Blanding all six of us were assigned to the 66th Inf. Division at Camp Rucker, Alabama, now called Fort Rucker.

After more training we crossed the Atlantic to England on the troop ship *George Washington*. We were in England for another twenty-one days for more training.

I will never forget the rain and fog and old wood-fired buses that we could ride free of charge every night to nearby towns to drink bitters in the little pubs. During the last week of our stay in England, I received through the Red Cross, three notarized letters from home that I could use to get out of the service.

My father was in the hospital from a mining accident and since he was disabled I was eligible for discharge to help support our large family.

I showed the letters to our company commander and he assured me that I could be sent home anytime I wished. I told him that I hadn't made up my mind and would rather stay and make out an allotment check to my family instead.

For a few days I was torn between going home and staying with my buddies, especially Clarence, even though the rumors were out that we were headed for the Battle of the Bulge. I will never forget the night that I broke the news to Clarence as we sat on my bunk bed.

He looked at me for a long time. Finally, with tears in his eyes he said, "Buddy, you can do whatever you want to but you know what I would do; I'd go home."

We both sat there crying for a few minutes, two grown eighteen-year-olds who had just completed basic training and were assigned to a Fighting Inf. Division. I got up and wiped the tears away and, to this day, I'm proud of what I did.

I said, "No, I can't do it. I have to stay in and see this thing through. I can't let you down." With that I put it behind me and never regretted my decision.

In the early morning of December 24, 1944, we started across the Channel on the converted luxury liner, *Leopoldville*, a Belgium ship controlled by the British. It stormed most of the day and most of us stayed below deck playing cards or sleeping.

At ten minutes after six on Christmas Eve, we were hit by a torpedo from a German U-Boat.

I couldn't begin to describe the next two hours of floating bodies and duffle bags coming from the hole in the side of the ship. Of watching soldiers being crushed between the ship and a destroyer that had come alongside to take on survivors.

As some of them jumped trying to hit the deck of the destroyer below, the waves would pull it away from the ship and crush them when the waves would toss the destroyer against the ship again.

One young soldier from Wisconsin refused to jump as he held on to the ship's rail. I tried to pry his hands loose as I begged him to jump, but he held on and went down with the ship.

I was one of the lucky ones that timed the jump right and was taken to Cherbourg, France, eight miles away.

Shortly after the destroyer left, the ship's engine rooms exploded from where it had taken on water from the torpedo hole and, in a matter of just minutes, it sank. Eight hundred soldiers went with it.

Among those rescued from the cold waters were Clarence, Jack and Calvin. We lived to be resupplied at Cherbourg and by January 1, 1945, we were on line against the Germans. But the cold, dark waters of the English Channel became the grave for one of our six.

After the war, when the remaining five of us came home, I was told that the mother couldn't accept the fact that her son was killed there in the English Channel and would set him a plate at the table and turn his bed down every night with the expectations of his return.

Which brings me to this--how special is a mother's love. They say that birds and animals have the built-in ability to forget the passing of their own after a few days--but not humans. We never forget--especially mothers.

As a little girl perhaps she played house and clutched a little doll and pretended that it was her little boy. On an old plank or on a rock, she set the table for him with her dish set and dreamed of the day when she would grow up and get married and her dream would be real. Her love for her son started when she was young and pretending.

A few years later, in her late teens she married and became the mother of the boy of her dreams. She tucked him in, set his place at the table, sent him off to school and watched him grow. When he was eighteen years of age she kissed him goodbye at the bus and sent him off to World War Two.

Sometime in late January, 1945, she received a telegram from the Government. 'Your son was killed in action December Twenty-Fourth, 1944. She



never could believe this. It did something to her mind.

His place was set at the table and his bed turned down every night. His sister would say, "Mamma, why do you set the place for him. He's not coming home."

"Oh, yes, honey, he'll be home. I know he will. One day he'll be back."

"But, Mamma, that letter from the Government."

"Oh, that don't mean anything. I don't believe that. He'll be back."

So tell me, how far, how long, how deep and where does it end--a mother's love? I marvel at the mystery of a mother's love.

Off there somewhere in the mountains of Virginia that mother may still be living and standing by the window, watching. God bless you, Mamma.

## SERGEANT PAULICK



January 2, 1945--A cold, cloudy day in the farm country of France. Just outside Lorient and St. Nazaire seven soldiers of the 66th Inf. Division, including myself, hunkered down over a map on the floor of the old, abandoned farm house. We listened and our eyes followed the finger as it darted over the map showing us where we would be going. The same

finger had pointed at me earlier that morning and the voice that directed it said, "I want you for a patrol to go into No-Man's Land today."

I thought to myself, 'Fifty thousand well-fortified German soldiers holding Lorient, St. Nazaire and all outlying villages, and somebody gets the crazy idea that a patrol of seven men can somehow go out there and return in one piece, and victorious.'

I watched the finger as it darted over the map without hearing or caring what the voice was saying. 'This was only our second day on the line and some fool wants to see what its like to die,' I thought.

Finally the voice and finger rose to his feet, folded the map, and asked if there were any questions. After a moment of silence his blue eyes rested on me. "How about you Kirk, any questions?"

"No questions," I answered. I could tell by the expression on his face that he knew my disgust with the idea but I don't think he knew how scared I was.

We stepped outside into about six inches of snow, draped sheet-white parkas over our shoulders for camouflage and carefully checked our weapons. We followed the blue-eyed, tall and slightly stoop-shouldered sergeant over the abandoned French farm through potato fields and snow-covered cabbage, which we would later make use of.

We entered a short span of woods just outside the bombed-out town of Hennebont. We skirted the town and entered the woods on the other side of it--truly a No-Mans Land.

We trudged on through the snow, across a hill, down in a hollow and up another hill. From here we could see the final hill and woods separating us from Lorient.

Here we stopped and listened while watching the woods on the hill ahead of us for about an hour. The woods reminded me of my Virginia home, of tracking rabbits in the snow and I wondered if I would ever see home again.

We didn't see anything nor, except for an occasional rifle shot in the far distance, hear anything. Finally the sergeant motioned with his arm and we began the trek back to our own lines.

If I hadn't been so numb with fear and anger at the thought of going on that patrol, I would have listened more closely and understood that the patrol was intended only to gather information and prepare our own lines and future penetrations.

The sergeant was in his twenties, perhaps twenty-five, and most of the

soldiers, who were nineteen and twenty, looked up to him. He was the father type, tough when he had to be and understanding to the point of being soft when that was needed. He had that certain something that is required to be able to lead men into battle. He was hand-picked from a Ranger Battalion in 1943 and assigned to the 66th Infantry Division to help mold young boys into fighting men.

He pointed his finger at me for any kind of patrol that he led after that, through Hennebont, Kershisver, The Hedge Rows and woods beyond. He taught me to pay attention and, above all, to think for myself; for that I will be forever grateful to him.

When the war ended we were loaded into box cars, of forty and eights, and sent to Koblenz Germany for occupation. On our journey across France, Belgium and Germany, the slow-moving train was halted for hours in towns and villages till the bombed-out tracks could be repaired.

It was during one of these layovers, while we were killing time alongside the tracks, that we discovered some tanker cars loaded with wine. Someone opened the tap on one of the kegs and there was a mad rush by soldiers with canteen cups, five gallon water cans and anything else they could get their hands on that would hold liquid.

It was a good two hours before the train whistle blew, alerting us to get back on and get ready to travel again. We had been having a merry old time and the most of us had too much to drink. While some kept up the merrymaking, others tried to sleep it off.

We arrived in Koblenz and two days later the blue-eyed Sergeant was stripped of his stripes.

Although every soldier on our box car, including just about every sergeant helped drink the wine, our Lieutenant singled out the blue-eyed one and busted him to Private. You could see the devastating effect it had on him for he was a proud soldier.

Our stay in Koblenz was short and we soon were sent back to France. From France they sent us to Austria and we remained there until we were mustered out, myself being one of the last in 1946.

It was in Austria that I noticed the sadness even more in him. I think as time drew near for him to go home, he dreaded the thought of being released as a private after all the years of working and molding young men into soldiers.

I wanted to tell him how I felt. I wanted to say, 'You made a soldier of me.' I wanted to say, 'You don't deserve this.' I wanted to say, 'I hate that *Ninety-Day Wonder* Lieutenant for doing this to you.'

I wanted to say all these things and more, but I was young then and couldn't bring myself to say them. He was discharged a few months before I was, as a private, and returned to his home in Dayton, Ohio.

I was discharged as a sergeant and proud of that rank, but I would have gladly traded ranks with him because he truly deserved it more than me.

Yes, he was a private on paper but in my heart and, I am sure, in the hearts of others, he will always be Staff Sergeant Paulick.

## ROAD HOG



It was during the early 1940's when I was working in my uncle's store that an elderly gentleman and his wife came from Pennsylvania and stayed in the hotel in Pennington Gap for a few months. He was a salesman for a brick siding company.

The siding was nothing more than tar paper coated with a brick-looking substance. It served as a good insulation on the frame houses in that part of the country. He traveled Lee and the adjoining counties selling it to homeowners. He would send in his orders and have someone install it when it was shipped in.

I guess he had never been used to the narrow mountain roads that we had there in those days. The big old Buick that he drove soon became a dreaded sight to other drivers when they would meet him on the road. Each driver had to pull over in order to pass safely and in some cases, pick a wider spot and pull over to a stop until the other car got by.

But the "Rule of the Road" for this old man was the middle and you just had to hope for the best on trying to get by without an accident. He ran several people off the road and went on his merry way as if nothing happened.

He soon gained a reputation for being a road hog.

One Saturday morning Walter Keith, who lived in a little community about two miles away at Old Dominion Power Company, came into the store for groceries. As a young man, I considered Walter Keith and Buford Wolfe the smartest men around, and was forever asking them questions.

As I was filling Walter's grocery list, he was telling about the latest victim of the old man and his Buick. He had run a car in the ditch but no one was hurt.

I asked, "Walter, what would you do if you met him and he wouldn't give you room to pass?"

"I would hold the road and make him lay over."

"That's exactly what I would do," I replied. "He won't run me off the road."

When I got his list filled, I put the groceries in the cab of the delivery pickup truck.

Earlier that morning, a lady from the same community did some shopping in the dry goods part of the store. She bought hose, slips, panties--mostly underclothes that any decent woman would wear.

She said that she was going on to town by bus to take care of some other business and asked if we would take the things that she had bought and set them on her porch if we had a trip out there that day.

So I put her bag of underclothes in the open bed of the pickup.

Walter got in and we started on our way with the groceries in between us on the seat. About a half mile away I rounded a curve and, of all things, here came the Big Buick right in the middle of the road, as usual. I had no

choice--either hit him or go off the road.

So off the road I went, over the bank and turned over on one side against some creek willows. The willows kept us from turning over in the river.

There we were, me on top of Walter, looking up at the steering wheel and the sky above. Groceries were all over and some had fallen out in the river through the open window. A bottle of catsup had broken and was all over my shirt, along with milk and broken eggs.

I squirmed around and finally got to my feet and was trying to reach the steering wheel so I could pull myself to the open window above me. Of course all this time I'm standing on Walter and will never forget what he said, "Would you get the hell off me?"

I pulled my shirt off because it was a mess and when I finally hoisted my waist through the window above, Walter got a hold on my dangling legs trying to pull himself up and in the process pulled my pants off.

So there I am standing on the side of the overturned truck with nothing on but a one-piece long handled underwear and a wool knit cap pulled over my ears.

Walter was sitting on the side trying to figure out how to get off the truck and up the bank without sliding into the river. A car came to a stop and a man got out. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No," I answered.

"Who was driving?"

"Peter Pan there," Walter answered, pointing at me.

"Where's the woman?" the man inquired.

"What woman?" I asked.

"Well, there's some of her clothes," he said, pointing to the willows.

I looked and there, hanging on a limb, was a slip and above on another limb, a pair of panties.

About that time another car, with three pretty girls in the back seat, stopped. As soon as they started giggling, I jumped to the bank, clawed my way to the road, crossed over and climbed the bank to the railroad, put myself in high gear and tore off down the railroad.

One of the old steam engines came along, pulling a trip of empty coal cars, blowing his whistle with every step I took, cheering me on. I cut across at the Osborn and O'dell homes where a pack of dogs took chase after me.

I went through the creek and crossed the St. Charles road, almost got hit by a coal truck but it saved me from the dogs. I ran through the alley to the side door of the store.

I ducked into the store, went around the meat case and into the back room where we stored flour and meal, backed up and sat down on a busted twenty-five pound bag of flour. That's when I discovered that the trap door on the winter underwear had been down all the time!

My uncle ran back to see what in the world had happened. He brought me another pair of pants and I put them on after dusting the flour off me.

My uncle got a wrecker to pull the truck back to the road. It was in good shape because of the willow trees saving it from falling into the water.



Walter got some more groceries and the lady's underclothes were replaced. Somebody got fifty cents off on that busted bag of flour. All I got was a lot of kidding from everybody.

And all I got from Walter every time I seen him after that was, "He won't run me off the road!"



## JUST LIKE YESTERDAY

It was on a cold, cloudy day in 1979 while on a visit up in Virginia to see my mother, that I decided to roam around over the hills and hollers of my childhood. I came upon this old place across the hill from where I was raised.

It had all grown up in forest but I could still see where the old house once stood. The rock foundation, pieces of wood here and there and the old barn, right down there by the lower fence. And the spring, covered with a piece of metal roofing, running deep and clear as crystal. An old rusty can lay nearby, probably discarded by a coon hunter.

As I stood there, I tried to visualize this place and this family of fine people, who had helped my family in any way they could. I looked back to the 1930's and saw that they were a happy family.

I remember the father had worked in the mines and would walk past our house way before daybreak on his way to work. He would bang on the side of our house as he went by and holler out, "Wake up in there, it's time to get up." You could hear him laughing as he went on his way.

He died at the coal face at Crummies Creek Coal Company leaving some grown up children and some younger ones that hardly had time to know him.

The family was held together by the oldest son and then on down to each one in turn as they became old enough to work and help with the support of the family. In my mind it was a beautiful thing, especially in the hard times of the Thirties.

The mother, how could I ever forget her, was a jolly person. I'm sure she was the big influence on the family's happiness.

I looked up at the hill I used to cross on the way to school. Most of the time we would come this way to miss the mud on the unpaved road and, from here, there was a wagon road that we took that came out at the Garrett place at Pine Grove School.

It's funny how I would always seem to get hungry when I would get near this house and she would say, "Come on in and eat with the twins." Yes, I remember. Well, most of that family have gone on now; most of them before I had a chance to sit down and talk with them.

As I stood there, gloom and disgust settled over me. Why hadn't I taken the time to see and visit with them; now it's too late. I stepped over and kicked the old, rusty can and started back up the hill.

On top of the hill, where the fence connected onto an old oak tree, is where you could lower the bars and go through. "But you must remember to put the bars back up so that horse won't get out," Dad would say.

They had the prettiest black horse I had ever seen. I always imagined him as a wild horse and was a little afraid of him.

As I stood there on the hill, the sun came out and in the shadows of my mind it all came back. It seemed just like yesterday. I could see the old place just like it once was--the cleared fields and every turn in that path that led down to the house. I could hear voices happy with laughter and well-

being.

There's two of the boys sharpening an axe at the old grindstone and I hear one of the girls holler, "Sug, bring in some wood." There's one of the girls hanging up a washing. And on that wagon road I can see Hubert and Jess Evans.

I stood there for some time with my mind completely turned back to the Thirties. Finally I heard a noise overhead and looked up to see a flock of crows winging their way toward the Preacher Kirk place.

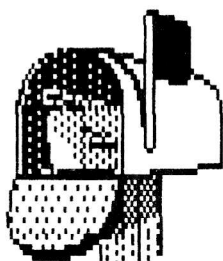
As I started to go I heard hoofbeats and turned for a last look just in time to see that black horse running across the field with his mane waving in the breeze, wild and free. I swear I could hear one of the boys holler, "Whoa, Prince!" Just then a cloud covered the sun and I turned and walked away.

Now, as I write this, its 1982 and another one of that family has slipped away before I got the chance to sit down and talk to him. Its strange how it seems just like yesterday that they were all together; a big, happy family and how it also seems like ages since I've seen and talked to them. Reminds me of something I read the other day:

Do not stand at my grave and weep.  
I am not there, I do not sleep.  
I am a thousand winds that blow.  
I am the diamond glints on snow.  
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.  
I am the gentle Autumn's rain.  
When you awaken in the morning's hush,  
I am the swift uplifting rush,  
Of birds in circled flight.  
I am the soft stars that shine at night.  
Do not stand at my grave and cry.  
I am not there, I did not die.

-Author Unknown

## OLD RETIRED MINER



I was driving through coal mining country, the coal-rich Cumberland Mountain region that includes Lee County, Virginia and Harlan County, Kentucky, when I noticed an old man alongside the road leaning on a mailbox. Thinking that he might want a lift to town I stopped and asked if he wanted a ride.

"No," he answered. "I just come down here to see if my check come. I live right up there on the hill."

I looked up the hill to where he pointed at an old, run-down house with a porch that ran across the front and sat high off the ground.

"I'm a retired miner," he said, as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of Camel cigarettes. "Be seventy years old next week."

His face was pale and wrinkled and I could see coal dust in the pores of his skin. I noticed he was having trouble breathing and thought about asking him why he still smoked cigarettes in his condition but changed my mind, knowing that his answer would be something like this:

"Why, my daddy lived to be ninety years old and smoked all his life. I've been smoking Camels for over forty years and they never bothered my lungs."

He wanted to know if I was from around there and when I told him that I was born and raised in that part of the country and was home on a visit to see my mother, his eyes lit up and I could see that he wanted to talk a while longer.

"Come on up to the house, Son, and set a spell. You ever do any coal mining?" he asked.

"Yes, I said. "About two years back in the late Forties."

We crossed the railroad and started up the hill. He would have to stop to catch his breath and would point to the surrounding mountains where strip-mining had left hundreds of acres of bare land.

We finally reached the porch steps and he held on to the railing and rested before climbing the steps. He sat down in an old creaky rocking chair and placed his hat on the floor. He crossed his legs, lit up another Camel and looked off to where the fog was hanging over the valley.

I could see in his eyes that he wanted to talk of his past memories, the good and the bad. And my guess was that, up until now, they were mostly bad. He sat there for a few minutes, wheezing and struggling for breath. Finally he began to talk.

"I can't hardly get up that hill no more. I used to come up here; didn't bother me a bit. I'd come home from work and Bud and Penny would run down the hill to meet me; wrap their arms around my legs and back away with coal dust on their faces off my clothes.

'Daddy, give me whats left in your dinner bucket,' they would both say at the same time.

'Wait 'til we get to the house,' I would tell them. 'I got something for you that I got at the commissary.'

I called Bud, 'Little Bud' and Penny, she was kinda mischievous, I called her 'Bad Penny'.

'Daddy, I saw the train go by today and the engineer waved at me,' Little Bud would say. Then I would tell him, 'Don't ever get too close to that train, Little Bud, and stay away from that slate dump.'

'Daddy, I climbed that tree in the back yard today.'

'Now, Bad Penny, you're going to fall and break your arm one of these days.'

My wife would be standing on the porch waiting. Momma, I call her. Boy, she was pretty back then. I would grab for her and she would pull away.

'Go get them clothes off and get a bath. And hurry up, supper's ready,' she'd say.

"That seems like a long time ago; things have changed. Bad Penny lives off yonder in Ohio. Got a family of her own. Its been a long time since she's been home. I sure would like to see the grandchillen. I wouldn't know them anymore.

"Well, the fog's lifting. Boy, them strippers are tearing that mountain away. Never had that when I was working the mines; it was all underground. Used to be a pleasure to look out over the mountains, but not no more. Trees all gone, topsoil washed away, why, a squirrel hunter told me there's a pond back there that a man can fall in and drown. No telling how many huntin' dogs have fell in there. Can't get out, it's straight up and down.

"There goes the train; Engineer waving to me. Looks like a bunch of empties going in. Gonna be a lot of coal shipped out of here this week.

"That diesel pulls a trip a mile long. I miss the old steam engines. Rode a passenger to Cincinnati one time, furthest I've ever been away from home.

"Wish I could have moved into town long ago. I got a little garden here, thankful for that, a few chickens. Can't have hogs anymore, got to where I couldn't carry the feed up the hill.

"But if the Lord lets me live a few more years I will try to move into town. My wife deserves it after all she's been through. I bet it would put ten years back in her life."

He flipped his cigarette butt into the yard, sighed, and continued in a tone so low that I had to lean closer to hear.

"Well, I ain't got nothing. I've heard it said that the Lord giveth and taketh away. We can't question that. But when its all totaled up, I come out ahead. I've still got my wife and Bad Penny. But I've got no lungs to speak of and I gave up Little Bud. What more can you ask of a man?

"He's over there across the waters in France. We've never been able to visit his grave. But I thank God for what He has allowed me to keep. He's been mighty good to me, considering all them years I spent most of my money on drinking. I thank God for that.

"Well, Momma just called. Dinner's ready. Will you eat with us, Son?"

"No, thanks," I said. "I'll have to be moving on."

"Hope my check comes tomorrow," he said. Then he looked down at a large coal truck passing on the road. "Boy, them coal trucks are tearing that road all to pieces."

I went down the steps and started down the hill. When I reached the bottom of the hill he called out, "You will come back and see us again, won't you, Son? Momma didn't even get to meet you."

I turned and looked up the hill. He was standing on the porch and a frail woman was in the doorway waving to me. I waved back and told him that I would be back the first chance I got.

## JUST WANT YOU TO KNOW

The nurse said, "You can go in now."

He walked in and sat down by her bed. She lay there pale, eyes staring straight ahead. He reached out and took her hand for the first time in years. In a broken voice, he said, "Mamma, you can't go. I can't do without you."

"It's always been hard for me to say things, but now I want to tell you some things that I've never told you before. They were in my head all the time."

"I know it's been a long time since I've told you this, but I love you."

"I meant to move you out of that old mining shack years ago, honestly I did, but you know we never had the money. That old habit I held on to for so long, it took all we had."

"And I wanted to take you over there across the waters to France, to Little Bud's grave."

"So many things I wanted to do for you, cause you deserved them. I want you to know that . . . well, thats just some of the things that I wanted to tell you."

"I'm gonna miss you."

A smile came across her face, just for a moment, as he sat there holding her hand. Then there was a slight shudder and she was gone.

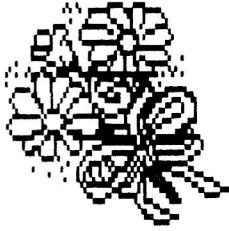
He leaned over and held her, sobbing uncontrollably. Finally, the nurse led him out into the hallway and asked if there was anyone she could call for him.

He fumbled in his wallet and handed her a crumpled piece of paper.

"That's my daughter in Ohio," he said. "I call her Bad Penny. Please tell her to come on home."



## LAST BOUQUET



Three years had passed since I saw the old retired coal miner. His wife died two years ago and he buried her atop a hillside across from his house. He could sit on his porch in his rocking chair and see her grave.

I drove up and parked alongside his mailbox, got out and climbed the hill to his house. I expected to find him in his rocking chair on the porch, but he wasn't there. So, after knocking on the door without an answer, I decided to go and stop by later.

As I started down the hill, something off on the other hillside caught my eye. It was him making his way up the hill toward her grave. I could tell that he was tired out; he would go no more than ten steps before stopping to rest.

I decided to climb up there and chat with him for a few minutes. When I got there he was down on his knees at her grave, holding a bunch of wild flowers in his hand.

I stopped about ten feet behind him and he never knew I was there. Just when I was about to call out to him, he began to speak to her in a low voice.

"Here's some flowers, Momma. I picked them on my way up here. They sure are pretty this time of year.

"Momma, I couldn't hardly make it up that hill. My breath's just about gone but I just had to come up here one more time. I got lots on my mind to tell you.

"Well, the first thing, now, you ain't gonna believe this...I go to church ever time they open the doors. I started a while back. That young preacher kept coming around, telling me that I ought to come to church. He just wouldn't leave me alone and, you know something, I'm glad he didn't, cause now I know what direction I'm headed in. I allus regretted not doing that when you was alive. Well, I couldn't wait to tell you that and I got something else to tell you.

"That daughter of ours, Bad Penny, she came in from Ohio a while back. Bought me a new suit, new shoes, got me all dressed up, took me to the airport and, all the time, telling me she had a surprise for me.

"You know where we wound up at? Across the waters in France, Momma."

There was a long silence as his voice broke. Then he went on.

"At Little Bud's grave. Its a beautiful place, row after row of white crosses. Privates, Sergeants, Captains, Colonels, Generals, their names on the crosses. Makes you proud to know that you're standing in the Ranks of Honor. Would have give anything if you could have been with me. Yes, we can be proud of Little Bud.

"Well, I better go now 'fore dark sets in. Don't think I'll be back anymore. I just can't make it up that hill, but I can see your grave from the porch."

He placed the bunch of wild flowers at her headstone, got to his feet and

said, "Goodbye, Momma."

I called out to him and helped him down the hill. Back on his porch we had a long talk. I could see that this troubled old man had finally gained some peace of mind.

## HE STROLLS THROUGH MY MEMORIES

I rounded a curve to see a policeman flagging down traffic. "What's your hurry, Bud?" he growled. "We have a funeral right here at the church. Slow it down and be careful."

"Whose funeral?" I asked him.

"An old retired miner who lived off yonder on the hill, just down the road. I forget his name. Engineer on the train passed there two days ago; saw him in his rocking chair and waved to him. He didn't wave back, which he had always done before. When they checked on him, he was dead. Must have went off in his sleep."

I walked into the church just as the young preacher began to speak.

"We're gathered here today to pay our last respects to one of our old retired miners--one of the old-timers, a vanishing breed. He lived on this earth seventy-six years, two months and three days, a great part of it filled with more troubles than most men can bear. But as some of you know, he sat quietly in our church services the last years of his life and, as one of our members said the other day, he looked more content than he had ever seen him in his entire life.

"He sat on his porch and talked to me just last week. He told me that everything was all right with him and his Lord. He said he was ready to wind it up here any time the Lord seen fit to take him on."

As the preacher talked on I looked around at the faces, some young, but most older and wrinkled and showing the strains of the hardships of trying to make a living in these rugged mountains.

A few dabbed tears away, some were in silent prayer. One lady chewed her gum without missing a beat and one young fellow kept blowing his nose.

Then I noticed the sad face of a lady up front. That would be his daughter from Ohio, whom he lovingly referred to as 'Bad Penny'.

When the service was over I walked out into the warm sunshine and looked off to the hillside where he would be laid to rest beside his loving wife. I became lost in my thoughts about what the preacher had said and the truth in it. But, in a way, not near enough had been said about this man who gave up so much here on this earth.

A man who worked the mines back in the days when you made fifty cents to a dollar a day right at the coal face with a pick and shovel, hardly being able to see the light of day because of the long hours spent underground. Most of the time having to draw script to use at the company store, which was worth only eighty cents to the dollar.

A man who gave his son to World War II. A man who spent a big part of his life struggling to breathe through coal-blackened lungs.

A man who takes to the grave with him a rich, refreshing character that so many of us wish we could have. But his time and his troubles built them in and those times are gone forever.

He had been a load on my mind since I first met him there at the mailbox,

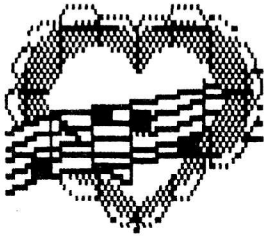
looking for his check. He was like so many of the old miners that I had known and I often wondered if he would ever make a change. Now, knowing that he had lifted a load from my shoulders.

Soon the weeds would grow up in his garden and around his house and somewhere in the future they would tear the old house down. He'll soon be forgotten. Oh, his daughter will come in from Ohio, maybe once a year, to put flowers on his grave.

He won't make the front page of the paper with a glowing account of his accomplishments in life. He'll be back in the obituary column as just another old, retired miner.

As I watched the pallbearers slowly make their way up the hill with him, I thought, 'As long as I live, here is a man that will come strolling through my memories. A character bigger than anything that I will ever again know in my lifetime.'

## IF I COULD WRITE A SONG



Most of my life I've thought I could write a song but after many attempts, I have come to the conclusion that it's not meant to be. But if I could write a song I would write of the hundreds of miners that have died in and around the coal mines across our country.

I would tell you about the young miner that we buried there in Lee County, Virginia, on a hill above the Admant Baptist Church, in a snowstorm. And I would tell you that as I watched his babies and the tearful face of his young widow in the blowing snow, I had my doubts that there was a God. If so, how could He be so cruel? And I would tell you that when the snowflakes on his face melted, I knew he was crying too, and I didn't hear a word the preacher said about how we must understand that God knows best.

If I could write a song I would tell you about Bill and Lula Jones, walking across Lee County, selling pretty, crepe paper flowers. I would tell you about Preacher Green and how he would preach at three or four churches on Sunday for nothing more than gas money, a homemade quilt or a Sunday chicken dinner.

I would tell you about Harden Stapleton and his old car with the big speakers on top. He would play the Chuck Wagon Gang loud enough to drown out the juke boxes in the honky-tonks, then turn to his text and preach a sermon.

And I would sing you the Legend of "Doc" Odell.

I would tell you about St. Charles and all its characters: Mainline, George and Crip and of all I know that went on under the sycamore tree. Just ask the tree and it will tell you the rest.

If I could write a song I would write the greatest train song that has ever been written. I would write about the old steam engines hauling away the best coal and literally scattering the people of St. Charles, Virginia all over the country. And I would tell you that the Sycamore tree is the heart and soul of St. Charles and stands tall and will never die, but of course it will some day.

If I could write a song I would write of my Grandpa who moved away from his own place just so we could have a place to live; and of my uncle who gave me a job that meant so much to me and our large family. I never so much as took their hand and told them how much I appreciated it till it was too late. I always meant to.

If I could write a song I would sing out to you my happiness at Christmas time when I would walk with my dad to Penn Lee Coal Company, sometimes in the snow, just to see the coal miners put on a Christmas play. How thankful I was to get the bags of apples, oranges and candy, and the warm feelings between me and my dad. As I grew older that all slipped away.

I would write a song about one of the best men I ever knew.

And I would write about another man who died in bed in his little store

and how his son let some of us school kids go in and look at him. He looked like he was just sleeping. That was my first look at death; I didn't sleep that night.

If I could write a song I would tell you of a real Walton's Mountain, Elk Knob, and about my grandpa, the kindest man I ever knew, and the hardships and the sadness he and my grandma suffered high atop that mountain in Lee County, Virginia.

If I could write a song I would write about my little crippled buddy that was shot from a horse and was buried in the Fall. I cursed the stars and dared them to fall. I still don't understand why that had to happen.

And about my cousin, whose body was shipped back from Detroit where he died by a hand that held a gun. There was no reason that I know of for his death and I will never understand it.

I could write songs of World War Two, good and bad, and tell you that some of my greatest disappointments came after the War.

I would write a sad song about my lonely sleeping room in Chicago, with nothing more to do than listen to the crackling of the hot water pipes in the radiator. I would follow that with how I met someone who, in the end, took me off the streets of Chicago and put meaning back into my life.

I could go back to my childhood and tell you how we ate from bucket lids and drank milk from baking powder cans and was never warm on cold, winter nights. I could also add that I haven't forgot where I come from, and don't intend to.

I would write you happy songs and funny songs, mostly about myself, and there would be lots of sad songs.

Then, theres songs that torment me, songs that no one will ever hear. Songs so sad that even George Jones would refuse to sing them.

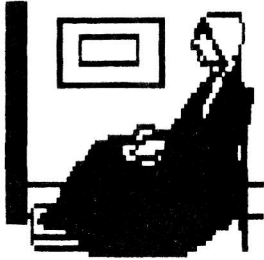
All these songs are in my heart and on sleepless nights the verses and music blend together perfectly. I get out of bed to write them down on paper, but my mind goes blank and nothing comes out right.

I don't have the ability to write a song and if I tried, it would sound foolish. I have them in my heart but when I start to put them on paper, nothing happens. That's how the Lord protects fools like me.

If I have ever known you, I have your song in my heart and deep in the night I can summon hundreds of voices, backed by a thousand guitars and listen to your song--if only I could write a song.



## THAT CHAIR



It must have been seven or eight years ago that my cousin, Fonda, asked me "How would you like to have Ma Kirk's chair?" meaning our Grandmother.

"Sure would," I answered. A few days later she brought it to me. One leg was broke about two inches above where it connected to the rocker part. It still fit together but it was pretty obvious that it would need a new leg or a splint on the old one. The fabric and finish of the chair was in good shape.

I intended to fix it right away but for this or that reason I could never get started on it. It sat there for weeks and every time I passed it I would think, 'What am I going to do with that chair?' Finally one day I wrapped it in a plastic drop cloth and stored it away in a utility building in back of the house, thinking I'd fix it come Spring.

But when spring rolled around, I needed other things out of the building and I was forever moving the chair to get to them. Each time it was the same, 'What am I going to do with that chair?' or 'When am I gonna fix that chair?'

Then in 1987 we moved to Dacula, GA. "Be careful with that chair," I cautioned the movers. I intended to fix it when we got settled in our new place--but nothing changed; it sat there. Every time I'd pass it the thing would trigger something in my mind, like guilt, laziness or defeat and I would vow to fix it one day soon--but soon never came despite all the time, worry and guilt about "That Chair." I carefully wrapped it in the same plastic dropcloth and stored it in the garage but this time, it was more in the way than before.

I was not the only one that had to work around the chair. Everytime my wife had to work around the chair or move it to get something she needed, it was always the same question, "What are you going to do with that chair?"

Finally, about six months ago, I took the dropcloth off the chair, looked it over real good and walked away. It sat there for another five weeks before I fitted the splintered leg back together and wrapped it in wide black tape. It turned out to be a good job and the break is hardly noticeable. Then I asked, "Where can we put this chair?" The answer was, "I don't know." So it sat there.

I have a little room where I go sit from time to time. It has a few books, radio, couch and a couple of chairs. One day I got the idea we could move one of those chairs out and bring in "That Chair." But I didn't dare mention it because I couldn't believe my wife would agree with me, so I put it out of my mind.

Two days later she said, "I want you to move something for me." I followed her into my little room. "This chair here," she said, "I want you to move it to the bedroom. I've made room for it." To my surprise it was the same chair that I had thought about replacing with "That Chair." Then she said, "You can bring 'That Chair,' as you call your Grandmother's chair, in here."

So in its rightful place by the window, "That Chair" is there when I turn on the radio, sit down across from it and relax. I close my eyes and I see her there rocking and smiling as she always did. I drift off listening to her soft voice. It takes me back to Stone Creek many years ago. I see my Grandpa Kirk in his overalls and black felt hat set square on his head, his crooked arthritic fingers wrapped around a hoe handle, working his garden.

I see Hence Cooper, Asa Stapleton, Tide Parks, Buford Wolfe, Uncle Robert and Aunt Laura, Billy Dean, George and Mary Lee, Jim and Ben Harber, Charlie Thompson, Mr. Wheeler on the hill, Dave and Finley, Tom and Charlie, Joe Doss, Addie and Mandy. And Ash Garrett from Kentucky riding on the biggest white mule I have ever seen.

I hear the rumble of the coal trucks and the lonesome train whistle from a trip of coal coming out of the St. Charles holler. As the whistle fades in the distance I'm sitting by the fireplace on top of Elk Knob with my Grandpa and Grandma Hobbs. My Uncle Rando is there telling a scary story about a graveyard down in the flats. We talk awhile and walk outside to look out over Lee County. My mother once said, "You can see all over the world from up here."

Uncle Rando points to a hawk that is riding the wind currents to the valley below. Then I say, "That looks so easy, I can do that too." So I lift off with Uncle Rando's words ringing in my ears, "I wouldn't try that, it's a long way down." Then I'm falling fast, the wind is taking my breath away. Powell River crawls like a snake through the farmland far below. If I can hit the deep water I might live, I think. But it's out of my control; the ground is coming to meet me fast. As I crash through the tree tops I awake to *177 Fly Away* on the radio. I look around the room and above "That Chair" hangs a picture of General MacArthur's military cap and on another wall General Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis and Stonewall Jackson, and on the bookcase sits a framed picture of Old Stone Face from Lee County, Virginia.

These things, along with "That Chair," is the link to my favorite people who were in the 1800's before all the clutter and moral decay that the 1900's brought us. And anytime I want to visit, all I have to do is turn on the radio, sit down across from "That Chair," close my eyes and listen to her safe voice as I flyaway.

## JUST WANT TO SAY GOODBYE

It's early spring 1985 and pretty shades of green cover the hills and mountains. Soon the dogwood will be in full bloom. From a distant hill a mocking bird sings as its mate builds a nest. A coal truck rumbles by shaking the ground around me.

Old George "Washington" Reynolds comes up the street carrying a brown grocery bag. He stops for just a minute and then goes on his way, but not before giving me a long look. I wonder if he knows.

It's spring time in St. Charles, Virginia. I've lived through a hundred of them or more, but this one is different because there's no leaves or greenery on my body. I'm dying.

I ain't been feeling well for sometime now. I think it started back about three years ago when George L. Kirk passed away. I missed him so much tearing up through here in that little car. Guess it kinda took the sap out of me.

As I told you before, knives have carved on my body, nails driven into me and bullets have been buried near my heart for years and I still lived on. But last fall I was burnt pretty bad and I have been on the downgrade ever since. Guess I was lucky I made it through the winter.

So by the time you read this, I'll be gone.

But I just want you to know how nice it's been living here. All these years amongst some of the finest, hardest working people on earth and, I might add, some of the toughest on a Saturday night. This town holds so many memories for me. I can still see the old, belching steam engines pushing the empty coal cars into Bonny Blue and Benedict.

The men gathering under me. Old "Main Line" shining shoes and calling out, "Going back to Alabama to more pretty girls than one."

I can see Bill Fritts and his brother Irvin, and young Clint Hughes, elbowing their way through the Saturday night crowds trying to keep some of the tough ol' boys in line. And that was no easy task through the 1940's.

I can see Mutt Williams off yonder across the bridge and Little Clyde Copeland performing the service for our community that he did so well.

I can hear "King Tut" talking with the players about Saturday's game with Pennington. "Lefty" Scott's pitching, there's Roy Rutherford, Cowboy Barker and some others I only knew by their last names: Davis, Young, Stallard, Pope, Martin, Holman and the list goes on. I can't remember all the names.

Before the game starts Black Gilley works the stands taking bets. I've seen him win a hat full and lose it all, and more, on the next game.

I can see the hundreds of miners that passed me on their way to the mines every day and the ones that Little Clyde Copeland brought back, still and cold.

I seen some of you from birth when you were on wobbly legs and watched you grow old on feeble legs.

I have seen so many die and so many leave, never to return. The town is just a ghost of itself with a few hangers on. God bless them for staying.

Will it ever be like it once was? I truthfully don't think so with all our best coal gone. But as long as people are willing to take a chance, there's hope.

Its been about six years since the most of you found out that I could talk, so I just had to tell you a few things before I pass on.

A lot of you I don't know by name but I know your faces. Lots of times I've seen you unload off that crowded bus right here near me.

I can see all the taxi drivers: Virgil, Roy, Wright, Ross, Moss, Perry, Carl, Ralph, Royce, Shuler, Eldridge, Sherm, Stanley, Chester, Jay D., Ed and Bud Speck. I think I seen Jay D. the other day. Maybe he's come back to stay.

Charlie Wheeler, John Carter, Gurnie Tester, Harve Kirk, Henderson Kirk, Mr. Hagy, Mr. Wallen, Wright Jessee, Charlie Redmond--these are some of the ones that I knew personally. I miss them so.

Minnie Kirk just turned a hundred--looks like she will outlive me.

Virgil Q. Wacks is still living. He moved away years ago, like most everybody else.

"Crips" off yonder in a nursing home. We shore do miss him around here.

Like I told you the first time I talked to you, I'm the heart and soul of St. Charles, Virginia and I stand tall. I can remember when I was a young sprout back in 1908 when Dr. Rucker tied his black horse to me. Mary Stapleton met Dr. Rucker there as he was ready to ride out of town on a call. She had brought her son "Harden" to him with a big risen on his chest. Dr. Rucker lanced the risen right under my branches.

Harden was only five years old. Thirty-five years later he would use my shade to play the Chuck Wagon Gang over the big speakers mounted on his car, loud enough to drown out the town's juke boxes. Then he'd take his Bible, turn to his text and preach a sermon.

Yes, I've seen the bad as well as the good in this town. Matt Herren was gunned down and died under me.

I take comfort in the churches. Although most of the town's people left long ago, the churches kept their doors open. Rev. Roy Corbin carries on at the Methodist Church and theres the Baptist Church on the hill where the ghost of Preacher Green still lingers on my mind.

Well, I'd better shut up now, before I get all misty eyed. I just wanted to tell you some of my feelings about this town and its people, and how proud I've been that you let me stay among you all these years. And that old, faded flag that you flew under me there for a while--I was so proud to be honored that way.

So to all of you that are still here, and to those off in other states, after I'm gone I would like to think that some kind of marker would be placed in my little corner that I occupied for so long here.

Charlie Province came by and took a picture of me the other day. I guess that's his way of keeping my memory alive.

Oh, yes, there's one other thing I want to mention--I'll never forget the time in World War Two, when that Parsons boy, I can't remember his first name, flew that fighter plane over here. He dived down so low that it shook my

branches. Near about scared me to death.

Well, old George Washington is standing under me again and I see a tear on his cheek. I'm mighty tired and getting the sniffles myself so I'll close this out now.

And about that marker--shucks, I know they will never put one there so just make a little room for me in your heart and, who knows, maybe some day, somewhere you will be able to sit down in my shade again.

I'm gonna send this to the address listed below with instructions to that feller to get it in the paper after I'm gone.

In closing let me say again how nice its been living here among you all these years. God bless you all and goodbye.

Carson Kirk  
2595 Whisper Court  
Dacula, GA 30211

**Note:** The Sycamore Tree died in the early spring of 1985 and was cut down.

## THE GOOD-HEARTED SWEDE

He was a big, good-natured, big-hearted man. He came to work at the factory where I was working in Chicago in 1952. He kind of took me under his wing and Lord knows I needed that, seeing that I was straight from the hills and was, suddenly, having to cope with big city ways.

He tended bar after work at nights and on weekends and there is where you would find me most of the time. We would visit the other bars that stayed open long after the twelve o'clock closing time at the one where he worked.

This went on for more than a year and I guess I felt, at the time, that I was having a good time in spite of the hangovers and struggles to get through the workday, only to start all over again at dusk.

He often talked of his wife and wondered when she would return. According to him she was off in another state taking care of a sick relative. But, as time went on, I began to notice his hard drinking and wondered if it had been going on for too long in the marriage, and his wife had simply left because of it.

I would later find out that this was true. She returned for a short time to try just one more time. By then it was no use; he was a complete alcoholic. She left for good.

He talked often of the younger brother in his home town of Jackson, Michigan and of his dreams of returning there to live and to start a new life. He talked more when he was drinking heavy. I think he himself knew it would never happen because he really never made an attempt to keep in touch with his brother. Maybe he feared that his brother would find out about him.

I will never forget the first time he had to go into the hospital with delirium tremens, or "D.T.'s", as they are commonly called. I had often heard of this but seeing it for myself the first time was scary.

He went in many times after that, staying long enough to get dried out. He would come out of the hospital looking pretty good except for being nervous.

I tried to help him. I talked, I preached, you name it, but nothing seemed to do any good. The company we worked for was tolerant and tried to get him straight, and went along with his off-time because he was a good worker and liked by all.

He would promise to quit drinking altogether and go without for a few days, only to start again, sometimes slipping out to the corner bar while at work. And lying when he was confronted with it.

At times I became thoroughly disgusted with him but, at the same time, felt sorry for him. He soon became hopeless as most everyone could see. His trips to the hospital became more frequent and the D.T.'s became more violent.

One cold, winter day in 1959, on a Saturday, he called me and asked if I would move his few belongings to a small kitchenette apartment that he had rented closer to work. We loaded his things in the car and drove to the apartment.

We carried his things up a narrow, winding stairway to the third floor.



I thought at the time, what a stairway for a drinking man to have to go up and down several times a day, without falling.

When I reported for work on Monday morning, I was told that he fell down the stairway that Saturday night and was in the hospital with a concussion. Within hours D.T.'s shook his body and pneumonia set in. He died three days later, never regaining consciousness.

The day after his death the superintendent at work called and said someone in the lobby wanted to see me. I went down and it was his brother. He had come to take him back to Jackson for burial.

We shook hands as he was saying, "They tell me you were his best friend."

"Yes, we were the best of friends," I answered.

"I had kinda lost touch with him," he said.

We talked awhile and I was very careful not to mention anything about his habit. I told him how he had talked of him and his plans and dreams were to return there to live someday.

"He always had great dreams," he said, smiling.

Yes, I thought, but for the past few years they have been poured from a bottle. He got up to leave and I promised to visit him someday. The snow was falling when he went out and I watched through the glass door as he got in the car and drove away. I stood there for some time, looking at the neon sign at the corner bar, 'Happy Hour 5 Til 6.'

I didn't stop there after work that day. Though it would be many more years before I stopped going into bars altogether, I give that man credit for showing me what can happen to you.

Had not it been for what I saw happen to him, it could have been me at some later date and I will forever be grateful to him for that. Someday I want to visit his grave in Jackson, Michigan. I owe him that much.

## HOW DO YOU SAY GOODBYE

I drove the winding, climbing street to the old white restored house above the town. It was a beautiful spring morning, May 12, 1982. On the way up I had a dread feeling and was tempted to turn back and forget the visit. What can you say to a dying man and how do you say goodbye when you leave.

I had never been real close to him because I had lived away too long, but I've always had a great respect for him.

I parked in the front and walked toward the wrap-around porch. I heard him call out from the east side of the porch where he was sitting in the morning sun. He was calling to my aunt to move him to the front part of the porch to get in the shade.

She helped him out of the chair and held him steady for the few feet that he had to walk. He had aged beyond belief since the last time I had seen him, about a year ago.

We sat and chatted for a while and my aunt went into the house just for a few minutes and we were alone. To me it seemed like hours. Be careful what you say, I thought. Don't say anything about death or dying. Don't mention that you're here for another uncle's funeral. Talk about something--but what?

I looked off to the top of a hill on the other side of the valley and asked if that was where the airport was. I already knew the answer but I asked anyway.

As I sat and looked at him I couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking. Since his retirement he'd had nothing but pain and suffering for about three years. He would get a little better and then real bad again, with no hope of recovery. He had the same dreaded disease that had taken another uncle a few years ago at Ken-Gem Coal Company.

He must know he's dying, but be careful you don't say anything.

Then I noticed a walnut tree in the front yard with some dead limbs on it and a pair of doves perched there looking right at us, as if they were watching over him. I got this feeling that maybe they came there every morning just to be near him.

Not knowing what else to say, I asked if that was a walnut tree.

"Yes," he replied. "Whats left of it; looks like its dying."

There, he spoke the word that I had been trying to avoid. I couldn't say anything for a long time. Finally, someone cranked up a lawn mower down at the bottom of the hill and broke the silence.

After a bit my aunt came back out and joined us. We talked a little longer and I got up to leave. I shook his hand and told him to take care of himself and I hoped to find him better the next time I seen him, knowing that I would never see him again.

But how do you say goodbye to a dying man?

As I went down the hill I thought about his life on this earth. A man who knew exactly what he wanted to do and how he wanted to do it and with a firm hand, got it done.

Independent and honest. A deacon in the church for as long as I could remember. I know we all must go but seems his kind go before their turn. But we can't question that.

He lived a little better than two months after that. I was glad when he no longer had to suffer.

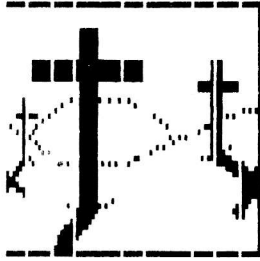
I'll soon push that last visit from my mind, because I want to remember him as a man who worked and got things done for over fifty years, in and around the coal mines, thirty years of it in the St. Charles Holler, Bonny Blue, Monarch and Benedict.

A man who believed in his Maker and kept the faith. A man who was independent, firm but always fair, and that laugh of his that I could recognize anywhere. A man in whose eye I have seen a tear more than once and that tells me more about a person than any other one thing.

Yes, I'll always remember him standing tall and strong. I'll forget the last time I saw him on the porch.

I wonder if that pair of doves did the same thing and went on somewhere else with his passing. Or do they still come and sit a while in the morning sun in that old walnut tree.

I wonder.....yes, I wonder.



## THEY SLEEP PEACEFULLY

Sunday, November 25th, 1984--My third visit in less than a year to the Confederate Cemetery in Marietta, GA. It is situated on thirteen elevated, gently rolling acres, surrounded by modern streets and buildings. I walk under the dogwood and huge oaks, some in need of trimming, as their limbs hang almost to the ground.

Three thousand confederate soldiers from fourteen southern states rest here, only eight hundred of them known. Most of them died in 1864 on Georgia soil. They were gathered from places like Cartersville, Mt. Hope and Kennesaw Mountain, from ditches and makeshift graves where they fell in battle trying to halt Sherman and his army of one hundred thousand on their march to Atlanta and the sea.

They died under the command of General Joseph E. Johnson; an army of fifty thousand who inflicted heavy losses on Sherman's army at Kennesaw Mountain. They were forced to abandon the mountain in order to defend Atlanta but there was no way to stop Sherman. In just a matter of days, Atlanta fell; Sherman continued his march to the sea.

As I walk among them I try to take myself back to one hundred and twenty years ago when most of them died. How strange that all the modern buildings, streets and automobiles are so near them. I think how nice it would be to have wagons nearby, and the whinnying of horses.

I look up at the old, tattered flag hanging in three pieces; a freight train rumbles by at the bottom of the hill and somewhere at a crossing in Marietta that mournful whistle blows. As I listen to the disappearing clack, clack of the wheels on the rail joints I am pleased that here is something they could identify with.

None of the stones are marked; a larger stone for each state lists the number of heroes from that state. Alabama, two hundred and eighty-nine; Mississippi, one hundred and twenty-nine; Georgia, one hundred and sixteen; and on down the line. A larger stone in the Georgia section, perhaps put there by a family member, in memory of Private George W. Mann, 42nd Georgia Regt., age 24, Killed at New Hope Church, May, 1864.

On up the hill I sit down on a bench across from the Little Cannon that is aimed North. It was captured by Sherman's army and held as a trophy of war until 1910 when it was returned by the United States to the cemetery.

I sit there and wonder why I keep coming back here and why, today, just like the other times I've been here, I have this strange, sad feeling.

I can trace my roots back long before 1860 and can find no distant relative who owned slaves in my native state of Virginia, but there were issues other than slavery that the South objected to, and it was a nation for four years.

As I look out over the headstones, I wonder how many of them fought and died for the sake of their nation and those issues other than slavery.

I look down in a swag where the Virginia Monument stands under the dogwoods. Although I don't believe in reincarnation I think maybe I'm wrong, and there is such a thing and I could be one of that group buried here in 1864? Could that be why I keep coming back here? Could I be searching for something? Maybe that is the reason for the sadness I feel when I visit here.

All my life I've longed for the times back then. So just maybe I did live then with the more simple things like oxen, mules and the bull-tongue plow. I think, even now, I would be more comfortable in that kind of setting.

Finally I stand and face the old, faded, tattered flag and there in my mind's eye, I see General Lee shaking hands with the young men in tattered gray while the horses mill around.

Less than a mile away, on another hillside, is the Marietta National Cemetery where over ten thousand Union troops are buried. Though they fought and died against each other, I believe with all my heart that they would extend their hands to each other now.

I get up to leave just as a black man drives up. He gets out and stands before the statue. As I watch he reads the words:

To the 3,000 soldiers in this cemetery,  
From every Southern State, who fell  
On Georgia soil, in defense of Georgia  
Rights and Georgia Homes.  
"They sleep the sleep of our Noble slain,  
Defeated, yet without a Stain,  
Proudly and Peacefully."

He gets back in his car and drives away. I think I understand his feelings and I hope he understands mine.

I don't hear your song anymore, Johnny Reb, and your leader's birthday passes without any mention in the news. Your living relatives are distant and far removed from your times and, for the most part, uncaring.

But as long as I live, Johnny Reb, I will fly your little flag over my bookcase and I will walk among your headstones for its here I find a sense of mysterious identity; a bond that I cannot break.

Sleep peacefully, Johnny Reb; I'll keep your memories fresh in my heart and stand watch Away Down South in Dixie.

## HE WAS LEAVING

From the day he was born he was leaving. Just as soon as he learned to walk, he was leaving.

He was leaving in the tender years of his school days, and didn't take advantage of the learning process.

As a fuzzy-faced teenager without direction or a plan for the future, he was leaving.

On his way home from World War Two, he was leaving. No matter how hard he tried to stay, he was leaving.

It took him a long time to go. It got to where I would catch a glimpse of him just once in a while and then one day, he was gone forever.

He left me just when I needed him most.

Oh well, I guess I knew all along that he had to go but I miss him more than I ever thought I would.

Now I need him to lean on when I'm tired. I need him to help carry my aches and pains and give me that little extra boost to climb to the top of the hill.

Yes, I need him and I miss him so.

If you should happen to see him out there, tell him I'm sorry that he had to go but, shucks, I understand. My attitude was mostly rotten while he was with me so tell him I'm sorry for the way I treated him.

Aw, I know he could never come back but if he could, I would never treat him like I did before. If I had it to do over I'd see that he got a better education, and tell him I'm sorry I kept him out all night a whole bunch of times.

Tell him, oh well, he knows how I treated him. Just tell him I'd take better care of him. And tell him that I...no...no, that wouldn't sound right. Just tell him I'm awfully sorry and I miss him more every day.

So if you see him just pass this along and I'll sure be grateful to you.

What's he look like? Oh, excuse me, I forgot to tell you. He looks like me when I was young. You see, my companion now is Old and he just pushed Young right out of my life. Old will be leaving too someday, but when he goes he'll take me with him.

So tell Young I'll never forget the times we spent together--the tears, the heartaches and yes, the fun we had together. But most of all, his patience. I can't understand how in the world he ever stayed as long as he did and put up with me. But he did. Now I realize that he could have been a much better person with a little help from me. So let me say once more, I'm sorry Young. I miss you something awful.



## THEY REACHED FOR THE STARS

This is a short story of three young men whose deeds and accomplishments would fill a book. Three fine young men, all born in Chicago to hard-working, middle-class families. They set their sights early on toward something better than street gangs and sleazy hangouts.

"Ricky," his mother said, "looked so tiny when he was born I was afraid to hold him; afraid he would break. I used to walk him to school. Then one day he said, 'Mom, I'm a big boy now. I can go by myself.'"

She followed along behind, at a distance, the first day so he wouldn't know it.

Later, at Walt Disney School, when he was in fifth grade, he gave his free time working with the kindergarten children. He was a very bright child and had many interests. He mastered the accordion in first grade only to give it up later to concentrate on sports.

And concentrate he did. The Chicago area will never forget his accomplishments at Lane Tech in football and baseball. Especially football.

From there he went two years to Dupage College where he played football and baseball. He had an offer from the San Diego Padres but turned it down and planned on attending Illinois State University. He had his heart set on being a Child Psychologist because, as he said in his diary, 'I love kids.' He had often said he didn't want to grow up.

He was picked to go to the north woods of Wisconsin as a counselor at a boy's camp for the summer of 1985. His good friend, Ramone "Choo Choo" Gilliam was also picked.

There they met Marc, also assigned as a camp counselor for that summer.

One of Ricky's entries in the last five days of his diary was, *I love it up here. I had a pet turtle that I called Gunch. I turned him loose because everybody and every thing needs space. Choo Choo has a snake. He named him Bagel. The kids are great here. I love kids. Today I watched the sunrise and the sunset; it was beautiful. And another, I love it here, but I miss everyone.* His girlfriend said, 'Ricky shared our dreams. I will never forget him.'

Alan, his best friend, visits his grave regularly and sits on the grass nearby. Alan said, "He was my best friend; we were inseparable. I know I will join him again someday. I can't wait."

His mother said, "This is the hardest thing in my life. Ricky will always be in my heart. I would give anything to have him back."

I offer these words of comfort: "You showed him love and understanding that only a mother can give. He grew into a young man that still called out to his father every night before going to bed, 'goodnight Dad, I love you.' A boy who watched the sunrise and the sunset and said it was beautiful.

You may liken his birth to that sunrise and his passing to the sunset. Remember, while it lasted it was beautiful and the sun always rises again after

the dark of night. His stay here was short but filled with good deeds and thoughts and, above all, he loved kids."

Alan said, "I met Choo Choo in my second year of high school. We became instant friends. He was somewhat of a comedian whether he meant to be or not. He always kept us laughing. I could talk with him if I had problems and he would listen. His advice was sometimes gruff and to the point but you could depend on him.

"He didn't have much family in Chicago except for his mother, who he loved and respected very much. I guess you could say we were his brothers (his roommates at college).

"Chooch wanted to be a great football player but I think he realized that was out of his reach. He only weighed one hundred thirty-five pounds.

Choo Choo would have also gone to Illinois State in 1985. His main goal in life was to be an FBI agent. I'm sure he would have attained that goal.

Marc's mother said, "Marc was such a happy child...always a smile on his face."

Marc did well in school. He learned to play the trumpet and was in the school band. He won many awards.

He took mechanical drawing and later he took up with computers. His teacher said he was a whiz.

He loved history and won a trip to Boys State for a week because of his knowledge of it.

He belonged to the track team and won about every award they had for discus and shot put.

He was to attend Illinois Institute of Technology to major in Computer Sciences.

He was a good listener and was a problem solver among his friends.

He was close to his family; traveled with them all over the US on family vacations; helped his father with painting and wall papering. He was just an all-round, good young man.

Four weeks after his death, his mother found herself about to change the way she was cooking something because she remembered 'he didn't like it that way.'

Marc told his mother just before he left for Wisconsin, "Mom, this has been a perfect year for me." He was a happy young man until the end. Let's remember him that way.

In the early morning hours of June 27, driving through rain and fog on a strange road, in a strange town in northern Wisconsin, these three young men drove into a lake and drowned.

They had the day off on the 26th and drove the seventy-five miles to Duluth, Minnesota to see a movie and buy a camera. They had taken the wrong road back to camp and become lost.

They asked for directions and went on their way but failed to see the turnoff sign for the highway they were instructed to take. They drove straight down a paved boat ramp into the lake.

They were buried side by side in Maryhill Cemetery at Niles, Illinois, just outside the city of Big Shoulders, where they were born.

Ricky's mother Sheila goes out at night and looks up at the stars. Just recently she asked the question, "Where is Heaven?"

I didn't have an answer except for 'up.' I don't think anyone knows the exact place.

Alan said, "The only thing I can take comfort in about their deaths is that they are together there."

I can think of no better epitaph than this:

Ricardo "Ricky" Velez, Age 19  
Ramone "Choo Choo" Gilliam, Age 19  
Marc Christopher Trinkl, Age 17

*"Three fine young men who reached for the stars and found the heavens."*

## SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE

A total of thirteen of us were at the old Kirk Cemetery in May of 1988. My nephew, Jess, and his wife and my niece, Lee, for the first time. Stanley and his son, Jimmie. Stanley hadn't been there since 1950.

The old place is nothing but forest. You can't see more than fifty feet ahead in the May foliage. There is still water in the old spring down in the hollow. The apple orchard is long gone, swallowed by the forest and you have to search to find the old home site.

Stanley looked off toward his old home place just over the hill. "There was a field right here once," he said. "We had it in corn." He stood and looked in that direction for some time and I think I know what he was thinking.

He could see his father and mother, my Great Uncle Robert and Aunt Laura. She always had a warm kettle of beans on the stove and would tell you to get a plate and help yourself, and there was his sister Ora, and brothers, Roy, Virgil, Haze and Chester. I could see a trace of sadness and a tear formed behind my dark glasses.

Lynn came back again, even though he was seriously ill just a month before. There was Bobby, Jake and Tony. Sonny was there after blazing a trail back there in his jeep a week earlier. Uncle Wright was there, as spirited as ever with his son, Wendell. Wayne and Randall didn't make it. Wayne broke his arm and hurt his leg off there in the Smokey Mountains somewhere. I wonder if he was trying to fly like a bird.

The change is unbelievable. You used to walk a short distance from the cemetery to a point and be able to see the cleared fields of the Doyle Kirk and Marion Stapleton places. Beyond there, the Charlie Rhea place and on into Brushy Mountain where Harve Kirk cleared land and dammed up a lake.

Off in the other direction was the Harve Doss place and beyond there, the George Woodard place. Walk on out the hill a ways to another point, you could see the Andrew Napier place with the twisting path leading down to the house. He was killed in the coal mines before some of his younger children got to know him.

A few years ago, I made the statement that I went back there to catch a vision and only caught a glimpse of myself. But since then, I have caught the vision. I can stand there and see it like it used to be.

Charlie Rhea working his tobacco patch in a distant field. George Woodard working his corn above the Pennington Cemetery. Marion Stapleton plowing and fussing at his team of horses. I can look down at the Napier place and see the twins chopping wood and that pretty black horse on the other side of the hill. 'Prince,' they called him.

I hear my old buddy Clarence, squalling around Dead Mans Curve in that old 39 Pontiac. He made it as he did many times. He also made it to 62 years of age, the same age as me, so don't let him tell you any different.

We gather at the old cemetery every year on Memorial Day. I was thinking the other day that down the road away some of us older ones won't be around,

but I do hope the younger ones keep coming back to keep the memories alive.

Maybe Gene or Jimmy will say, 'There was a field of corn there once, my Daddy told me about it in 1988 when we were here.' And one of Randall's boys will point out the huge hemlock and say, 'My grandfather planted it there back around 1910.'

And remember Lynn? He came in May of '88 even though he was sick. And don't forget Uncle Wright for the stories and history about our ancestors that he could relate. And always remember to ask someone to pray, as he would want it that way.

As for myself, I will come up short on things to be remembered by. So if my name comes up and some one says, "Sure, I remember him, he was the one that was always seeing and hearing things that weren't there. If you ask me, he was kinda strange." Then someone else will add, "And he shed tears behind his dark glasses." Then they will all have a good laugh.

I'll settle for that 'cause every one should be remembered for something.

A fellow asked me the other day why I keep going back. "You tell me its changed and you don't know most of the people there anymore; so why do you keep going back?"

I told him, "I go back to see my mother, she's still living. I also still have living aunts and uncles and cousins there. I go back to the old cemetery and the old home place of my great grandfather and great grandmother to stand at their graves and let them know that I care.

"I go back to see her feel her way out on the porch and call out, 'Alec, Jasper, Robert, Elihu, Benny, come on in. Suppers ready.' She was blind but she did most all of her own housework. She died before I was born, but I have heard so much about her that I can see her there. I did see him and remember him well.

"I go back to taste the early June apples that ain't there anymore, and pull a crock of cold milk out of the spring down in the hollow.

"I go back to the old place where I was born, nearby."

"The oak trees at the spring have grown to the sky, the old rock fence for the hog lot still stands. A dead pear tree is standing at a corner of where the house used to be, but to me it's still there and as I look around, memories come rushing in and a tear forms behind my dark glasses.

"I go back to see my Great Uncle Robert and Aunt Laura within shouting distance of my old home place. I help myself to the beans on the stove and sit with Chester on the porch. We watch Uncle Robert dig sweet potatoes from the sandy bottom land alongside the creek.

"I go back to see Dewey John Stapleton limping along. He was shot from his horse and killed when he was a young boy. I didn't understand why then and still don't.

"I go back to hear my Great Aunt Julie whistle and sing, *Will You Miss Me When I'm Gone?* Yes, we do miss you, Aunt Julie.

"I go back to Stone Creek to hear my grandmother's soft voice, even though she's not there anymore.

"I go back to where Dick Cooper's Cafe used to be and hear the juke box

blaring over outside speakers. The words are 'Don't let your sweet love die like flowers in the Fall, Don't take away the smile and leave a tear.' It goes on and there I see Ebbie Cooper's round face smile and a tear forms behind my dark glasses. "I go back to my Uncle L.C. Martin's store. He gave me a job when I was very young and shored up my confidence. I was just a scared kid.

"I go back to 1944 when I was working in the store, just before I went into service. Old man Bill Hendricks told me one day, 'You don't have a lick of sense. You don't know when to come in out of the rain.' Walter Keith and Henry Perkins agreed with him and they had a good laugh while I fussed and fumed.

"I guess they were right. Just the other day I stayed out too long in a rain shower and walked into the house dripping wet. The first thing I heard was, 'Don't you know better than that?' Know better than what, I asked? 'Don't you know when to come in out of the rain?' I could hear Old Man Hendricks laughing. Haw, Haw, Haw...some things never change.

"I go back to the 1940's to mingle with the Saturday night crowds at St. Charles.

"I go back to where the old Pine Grove School used to be on the hill. It was there I got my education, all five grades of it. Me and Chet Middleton exchanged books around the side of each others heads. And down the hill at the old church, I can see my Grandpa Kirk nodding approval to Preacher Green's sermon. I can hear the prayers of Mary Lee Woodard, Mattie Head and Mandy Rhea.

"I go back to see Ronnie and he hugs my neck and says, 'You're my Buddy, I love you.' I searched for his grave the last time I was there in the Cecil Cemetery. I didn't find it and a tear came behind my dark glasses.

"I go back to stand in Lee Memorial Gardens, the resting place of my father, grandfather, grandmother, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends and acquaintances. From there I look East to Elk Knob, and out of the forest I can pick out the green fields, the barn and silo, the vat for dipping sheep, the bucket line to draw water from down in the hollow. I sit around the fireplace with my Grandpa and Grandma Hobbs and listen to one of my Uncle Rando's scary tales as old Frank barks and howls outside."

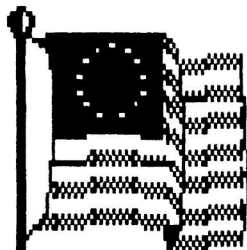
The fellow stood there shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Finally he said, "You mean to tell me, you go back there to see and hear what's not there?"

"Yes sir," I answered, "that and more. I could go on all day."

"You know back there where the old man said 'You ain't got a lick of sense? Well, he put it mildly. You're crazy as hell.'" I watched him walk away shaking his head. And then from some far off place I could hear Old Man Hendricks, "I told you so. I told you so," and as he went into that familiar laugh of his, Haw, Haw, Haw, Haw, tears started behind my dark glasses....some things never change.



## THEY FOUGHT A GOOD FIGHT



It was a beautiful sunny morning on July 4, 1984. 'What a day for a parade,' I thought as I walked among them. Pvt. Maker, U.S. Army, Vietnam; Pvt. Bogdon, U.S. Army, World War I; Carl James Stell, World War II. On down the line I went. Pfc. McDonald, USMC, World War II; 2nd Lt. Evans, World War II, from Alabama; Sgt. Bridges, 22nd Inf. 31st Div., World War I, a Georgian. Master Sgt. Lovejoy, U.S. Army, World War I and II, from Wisconsin; Elkan S. Selliger, Spanish American War; Chester A. Lawson, Horseshoer, Company C, 310 Supply Train, 85th Div., World War I.

They were all in perfect formation, thousands of them that covered several acres of rolling grassy hillside land, shaded by oaks, pecan magnolia, pine, maple and crepe myrtle.

No, they were not at attention or parade rest, nor was there any soldiers' banter or shuffling of feet. No ring of rifle butts on the ground, nor any gruff commands. This was their final resting place here at Marietta National Cemetery, Established 1866.

Also, here rests the remains of 10,132 officers and soldiers who died in defense of the Union from 1861 to 1865, with names like Corp. T. J. Simpson, from Ohio; John A. Cole, 40th Ind. Inf.; Sgt. J. E. James and William Manlove on either side of an unknown soldier, of which there are many.

On up the hill I walked. Fredrick Kline, 46 Pa. Inf.; Pvt. Francis D. Mathews, Co. C, 38th Regt., Ind. Vols., born 1843, killed, 1864; Charles Randall, Co. D., 10th Mich. Inf.; John V. Elkin, Co. G, 21st Ky. Inf.

On top of the hill there's a monument in memory of 405 Union soldiers from Wisconsin, all killed between 1861 and 1865.

I sat on a bench on top of the hill and watched a squirrel perched atop the headstone of Adam C. Collins for a minute or so, before jumping to the headstone of Daniel Bishop, both from Ohio. Every state is represented here and every war in which this nation has been engaged.

As I looked out over the thousands of headstones I could see no more than three bunches of flowers and thought it strange that I was the only person in the cemetery. On the two hundred and eighth birthday of our Nation's Independence, you would think that a portion of the citizenry would be here to honor some of the protectors of that independence.

I guess to most of the people celebrating this day, it means going to the beaches, attending a rock concert in our nation's Capital where the alcohol and drugs flow free, or perhaps going to a baseball game capped off by fireworks at the end of the day.

Its mostly fun and games nowadays and patriotism is in the past. Oh, sure we can get all worked up over a game or the Olympics and wave the flag but I'm afraid our heroes are no further away than the TV screen or Hollywood.

I sat there and wondered if those resting souls would approve of the way America has changed. More freedom, yes, free to travel to other lands and

embrace our enemy. Free to return and do it over again and again.

And free to resist the draft and burn the flag and, at the same time, get a government loan to go to college and never repay it. Yes, that's America today...drugs, gutter magazines dressed up with fancy, high-sounding names. Abortion clinics, dirty movies and an ever left-leaning crowd, all in the name of "My Rights."

The right to do wrong, in most cases, and no man has that right. Who's to blame? That aforementioned crowd, along with people like me that have stood back and watched it happen and not raised a hand to stop it.

Finally I got up and started down the hill. Under some huge oaks I stopped at the larger headstones of two Generals and a Colonel. The stones most likely put there by family members. Inscribed on the Colonel's stone was this:

*I have fought a good fight, I have finished the Course,  
I have kept the Faith. 2 Timothy 4:7*

Yes, Colonel, no blame can be placed on any of you who rest here. From the Civil War, World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam and all the others, you have fought the good fight and the grass grows a pretty shade of green over your graves.

I went on down the hill and walked outside the entrance gate to get a picture from the street. A four-wheel drive vehicle rounded a corner with the radio blaring as loud as it would go.

Just as they passed, someone threw an empty beer can that rolled to a stop at my feet and hollered out, "Waving the flag today, Pop?"

I stood there and watched them disappear over the hill, turned and kicked the beer can across the street and walked to the car with tears in my eyes. Why? Because they fought a good fight and nobody gives a damn.

## CAMP BLANDING MEMORIES

Heading home from Florida in March, 1992, I decided to drive by Camp Blanding near Starke, Florida. It was never open to the public for the twelve years I lived in Florida, but to my surprise it was open. The guard at the gate said, "Drive around as much as you want, just don't cross the railroad anywhere on the base and don't take pictures of the training facilities."

They opened a museum just inside the main gate about a year ago. The thousands that went through basic training, plus every division that trained there, is well represented in the museum.

After touring the museum we drove around the base. Nothing looked very familiar; the old huts had been replaced with more modern barracks. The old guest house and the generals house were the only ones left standing from my days there, almost fifty years ago.

Kingsley Lake looked the same. How well I remember the five mile speed marches around it before daybreak. The Florida National Guard is based there but, at this time of year, there were very few soldiers on base and just an occasional Army vehicle passed by.

I got out of the car and looked out over the land as level as a table top, dotted with pines, palms and grass growing about as well as it can in the sandy soil. The white sand is still hard to look at in the bright sunshine.

I looked out across the railroad where the guard said not to go, out beyond the scrub oak, pines and underbrush; out there, I think, in that direction lies Mud Lake, swamps, mosquitoes and wild hogs. Out there, and now all around me are the memories. Memories of the place teeming with young soldiers, most like myself, away from home for the first time. For many a short furlough home after basic training then on into combat; for some never to return again.

As I stood there I could hear the voices, the fast clipped speech of North and East, a Midwestern farm boys half drawl and the pure Southern drawl. Laughter, curses, banter and always, the complaining. All around me I could see the faces, hundreds of them. Captain Rayburn, Lt. Bennett, Lt. Price and First Sgt. Leatherwood, how that name fit him with his skin baked to leather under the Florida sun.

Just across the railroad standing in a patch of white sand were the boys from Lee County, Virginia. I recognized most of them--my cousins Hayes Kirk and Clyde Rhea, Clarence Napier, Jack Evans, Carl Kegley, Calvin Parsons, David Gillenwater, Elmer Neeley, and the smiling face of Charles Goins. As I looked at the young faces from almost fifty years ago I thought, where are they now?

My cousin Hayes is in a nursing home in Big Stone Gap, Virginia. I went to see him; he didn't talk and only opened his eyes twice, so I don't know if he recognized me. Clarence was like a brother to me in our young days and that hasn't changed. The feeling is still there.

Jack and Carl died a few years ago and I've lost touch with Calvin and Elmer. David was in bad health the last time I saw him. My other cousin,

Clyde, was wounded in battle and lost the use of one arm. He died about ten years ago.

As I watched them, a crow was calling from a nearby pine tree and out there somewhere in the swamps, I could hear a bugle clear as day. Someone was playing taps. I turned toward the sound for a few seconds and when I looked again at the patch of sand, they were all gone except for Charles. He stood there smiling.

The bright sun shining on the white sand caused my eyes to fill with tears and I had to turn away. You see, Charles never returned home to the hills of Lee County. Our troopship was torpedoed in the English Channel and the channel became his grave.

So to all the men who trained at Camp Blanding: in my mind I heard and saw some of you there in March of 1992. The bugle sounded for some of you in the war and many have died since. For those of us remaining the youth has faded from our faces and the sound is ever closer. Maybe that's why I heard it so clear coming out of the swamps of Camp Blanding.

God bless all of you and let's hope Camp Blanding forever remains a shrine to the young men who trained there. Maybe a hundred years from now someone will see us standing in a patch of white sand and will have to turn away with tears in their eyes from the bright sun shining on the sand.

### SOME MEMORIES NOT SHARED

My wife and I stopped at a nice rest area on Highway 85 North of Atlanta one Sunday afternoon. We grilled some hot dogs, looked at the paper, watched the steady stream of traffic on 85 and was surprised at the number of people that are in and out of the rest area. Some seemed in no hurry, while others rushed in and out as if they had a deadline to meet.

We had been there for about two hours. At five in the afternoon, we loaded the grill and picnic basket back into the old 1950 Chevy. We sat back down in the lawn chairs with intentions of heading for home within fifteen minutes.

We had sat there for about five minutes when a pickup truck came off the highway and parked down aways from where we were. The driver got out and leaned up against the truck bed. He looked all around the rest area as if he were sizing up the situation.

After about five minutes he strolled down the walkway with his eyes on the old Chevy. He stopped in front of it, looked it over real good, moved to the rear and looked it over from there, came back around the side, cupped his hands over the window glass while peering in at the steering wheel and dash. Then, he backed away about twenty feet, tilted his head to the right and then the left, moved in about five steps, lit a cigarette and stood there looking for another three or four minutes.

Finally, he shook his head, turned and walked toward us. "Forty nine or fifty?"

"Fifty," I answered.

"That's what I thought," he said. "Only difference in a forty-nine and fifty was the trunk handle." Then he walked over to us, sat down in the grass, stretched his legs out, crossed them, positioned his hands on the ground slightly behind him and leaned back.

"Owned a forty-nine, best car I ever had, paid seventy-five dollars for it. Man that had owned it had taken good care of it. Yes sir, they made 'em good back then. Owned a twenty-five Ford once. Wonder what that thing would be worth now. Bought an old thirty-one Chrysler for thirty-five dollars. They had some wood in the wheels, you know. I drove it through high school; good car. You folks from around here?"

"Yes," I said. "Decatur. Where you from?"

"Born and raised in Kentucky," he said. "Been in Atlanta two months now. Thought it would be a good place to work and its close enough to Kentucky to run up there over the weekends, but I don't like it here. The people are O.K., and there's work but I don't like the way you have to go about getting it. I just called a friend in Dallas this morning; guess I'll be heading there in a few days."

"What kind of work do you do?" I asked.

"Structural steel. I've worked all over the country: Cleveland, Ohio, New York, all over Pennsylvania, Disney World in Florida and Houston, Texas.

Don't have many clothes, just what I can carry in the cab of that pickup. Yes, sir, cars ain't what they used to be. Where you from?"

"Oh, I was born and raised in Virginia, but I live in Decatur now."

"Virginia, what part?" he asked.

"Right down in the southwest corner, near Cumberland Gap and one mile from Harlan County, Kentucky."

At the mention of Harlan County his eyes lit up and he started to smile. "This old girl came in on the bus from Detroit one night, came to my house and wanted me to take her home, some little town there in the mountains of Harlan County. Tried to get her to wait 'til daylight but she insisted on going that night. Never will forget them mountain roads. Coming back the next day in daylight, some places you could look down five hundred feet. No guardrail. Never will forget that."

Then he asked, "Say, how far was your home from Bristol, Virginia?"

"About seventy miles"

"That's where the Carter Family was from, somewhere around Bristol. I hear they have some kind of show there on weekends. Put on by one of the old members of the Carter Family. Sure would like to go there sometime," he said.

"Yeah, I've worked all over the country. Met a lot of people, got a girlfriend in Kansas City. Met a girl in Gilley's down in Texas, she was from Indiana. Liked her a lot. My son came and stayed with me a while last year. I enjoyed that."

It was hard to judge his age, maybe fifty, rugged outdoor complexion. I could picture him walking a steel beam high above city streets, somewhere in Texas.

"Yeah, I was hoping that I could stay here so I could run up to the hills of Kentucky once in a while, but guess I'll have to move on. Texas is a long way from Kentucky."

The conversation went on and he was showing no signs of slowing down. Finally my wife said to me, "You know it's eight o'clock?"

I got up and folded the lawn chairs and put them in the old Chevy. He picked himself off the ground, leaned against a lamp post and continued the conversation. I could see that he would stay and talk another three hours if I didn't go ahead and leave.

We moved toward the car and he followed. As I opened the car door it dawned on me that we hadn't even introduced ourselves. I stuck out my hand. "Kirk's my name," I said. "Sure has been nice talking to you."

"Well, how about that," he said. "Guess we were just too busy talking. Myers is my name."

As he gripped my hand, he said, "You know, I never seen you folks before in my life and most likely will never see you again, but seems like we have always been neighbors."

"We have," I said. "Just a few hollers and ridges separates where we grew up."

He was standing there waving as we pulled away.

As we drove toward home I had a good feeling about staying and talking

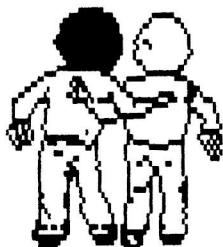


with him. I could see how lonesome he must be and how good it made him feel to talk to us and share some of his personal life, even with total strangers.

Thinking about it since then, though, I feel sad about his life. He told us so much about himself, about brothers and cousins, about a son but no mention of a wife. Makes me wonder about the rest of the story.

As he walks the steel beams high above Dallas, Texas, is his mind on Kentucky? That's where most of his memories are. Some memories he will share with others along the road but some he will never share. I think of him and I wish him well, where ever he may be.

## ME 'N GEORGE, WRIGHT, ROY AND VIRGIL



I look across at my grandmother's chair and the first thought that comes to my mind is, 'Me 'n George, Wright, Roy and Virgil.' I guess I heard my dad say that a thousand times when he would be telling about his boyhood growing up with them. George and Wright were his brothers; Roy and Virgil his first cousins. He would also mention Buford and Walter, distant cousins, but 'Me 'n George, Wright, Roy and Virgil' was the beginning of many stories that I will never forget.

Roy died some years ago. I remember when I was a kid and Roy was still single and at home right around the hill from where we lived. He had some kind of car; I don't remember what it was, but the body was gone. All it had was the frame, seats and the motor. He drove it around just like some of the young men of today in their fancy vehicles.

I would go there to play with his younger brother, Chester, and if the old "skeeter" was there (that's what Roy called it), Chester and I would sit in it for hours. We would talk and travel all over in that old skeeter--Harlan, Pennington Gap, Bristol--and the only wheel that turned was the steering wheel. Years later, on my way home from the war, Roy was the driver of the bus that took me from Bristol to Pennington Gap. We talked all the way, just like Chester and I did when we were kids going nowhere in that old skeeter.

George, my uncle, died about ten years ago. I had great respect for him. He was mostly self-educated from years of managing and bookkeeping, starting at Penn Lee Coal Company at a very young age. A big thrill for me as a kid was when he would let me ride in the rumble seat of his old Essex car. I will never forget his help and kindness through the years. At his funeral I thought of something I had read somewhere and to me that's what he was--a "Prince of a Man."

Walter died about two years ago. I didn't get to know Walter and his brother Buford all that well. I had seen and talked to them at St. Charles a few times at the pool room or under the old Sycamore tree where all the tall tales were told but my dad grew up with them and talked of them often.

Virgil lives at Stone Creek near a coal grading tipple that he built and operated for many years. I remember when he owned and drove a cab at St. Charles. Chester would take me to the Saturday night movies and Virgil would give us a free ride home but we would have to wait until well after midnight sometimes 'till he transported the miners home to the coal camps. Chester would say, "Doggone it, we'll never get home."

I had a short visit with Virgil last year. He's 84 years old and has lost his eyesight but he is not in the dark--his vision is of something beyond this world. We had talked about ten minutes on my visit there when he asked, "Carson, are you all right?"

"Oh, yes," I answered. "I'm making a living and so far, got pretty good health."

"No, that's not what I mean. Are you all right with the Lord?"

I thought, 'Here's a man that's lost his oldest son to a mining accident, lost his youngest brother, Chester, under tragic circumstances, lost his eyesight and has to sit and listen to the sounds around him. But at the same time he worries about me and, I'm sure, about many others.' It made me wonder--am I all right? Thank you, Virgil, for caring. The world needs more like you.

My uncle, Wright, is 82 years old. He moved to Kingsport, Tennessee a few years ago after living all his life in Lee County. Long before I was born, at the age of 14, he was driving a team of horses and hauling water to supply a steam shovel building a road from Stone Creek, in Lee County, Virginia, across the mountain into Harlan County, Kentucky. He showed me a picture when I visited him last year. A boy among men sitting on the water wagon. They had just made a cut in Black Mountain overlooking Crummies Creek, Kentucky. Others in the picture were his father, A. V. Kirk; Carson Strong, the road contractor from East Tennessee; Howard Smallwood, Rich "Granny" Thompson, Frank Caywood, Hobert Caywood, Henry Lane, Cecil Bull, the steam shovel and two old Ford trucks.

In 1931, at the age of 21, he married pretty Esther Green from St. Charles, Virginia. I remember he graded out a place to build a house right below where we lived at the old homeplace, but for reasons that God alone knows, it wasn't to be. At the age of six I stood at her bedside at the old Russell place in Stone Creek; her beauty was faded from the dreaded disease Tuberculosis or TB as we called it back then. Just 22 days short of their first anniversary, she died.

In 1939 he married Dorothy Riggsby. They raised four children--two boys and two girls. When Dorothy's sister died they took in her daughter, Phyllis, and cared for her until she finished high school.

Each year around Memorial Day, Wright goes to Esther's grave there in Cecil-Fry Cemetery. He tidies up the grave and pays his respects, with Dorothy by his side. Strange? No, that's understanding and pure love.

Back when I was a teenager, he measured me for my first suit. I will never forget that; had to wait a few weeks for it to come from some far-off mail order house. Over the years he tried to give me advice. Good advice; but I never listened. I remember once he told me that I ought to get a haircut more often. To this day, someone has to tell me I need a haircut. He has been very special to me and always will be.

Buford is 85 years old. He fought in the early part of World War II--North Africa, Tunisia and Italy. He married Mary Collins 47 years ago and they live there in Pennington Gap. They gave up a son to a coal mining accident. He can't hear very well anymore and his memory ain't what it used to be.

Virgil married Stella Parks 61 years ago and they have been members of Admant Baptist Church for over 50 years. Wright and Dorothy have been together for 53 years and they also have belonged to Admant for over 50 years.

You talk about family values which seem to be slipping away as time goes on. I salute these folks and many others from their generation who joined

hands and stayed together through the good and the bad.

I heard a song the other day that sounded as if it had been written for these folks. It went like this:

Look at us after all these years together,  
Look at us after all we've been through,  
Look at us still leaning on each other,  
If you want to see how two loves can be,  
then just look at us -  
We'll go down in history -  
When they want to see -  
How two loves can be -  
They can look at us.\*

Willis Kirk, born 1774, died 1871; buried on Stone Creek alongside the Harlan Road in Lee County, Virginia. Willis is the granddaddy of most of the Kirks in Lee County. I think he would be proud of these descendants.

I look across at my grandmother's chair again. The thought is still there: Me 'n George, Wright, Roy and Virgil...Buford and Walter, too.

\*Lyrics from song by Vince Gill.

## PROLOGUE

I wrote my first story in 1978; it was about my great grandmother. Dad took me to her grave when I was about six years old. She died in 1925; I was born in 1926.

As I stood at her headstone I asked my dad what it said after her name. "Gone but not forgotten," he said.

Then I asked, "Does that mean she's gone, but not too far?"

He smiled and said, "Yes, that's what it means."

I guess if I was looking for a title for that story, that would be it, 'Gone, But Not Too Far'. As a matter of fact if I ever put all my stories together in a book, that will be the title because the people and things that I have written about are mostly gone.

A few years later, I fought in the Great Horseshirt Battle at Pine Grove Grammar School. Not long after that I lost my fear of two men...one of them when he washed my face with a cold rag when I almost passed out in front of his house on my way home from school; the other when I was relieving myself on a stump overlooking the old, muddy road.

Then at about twelve years old, I loaned the thirty cents that I had earned hoeing corn to a man with a bright, shiny Packard. That turned out to be the 'Poorest Rich Man' that I had ever seen. But eight years later, I ran into him again and he turned out to be the 'Richest Poor Man' that I had ever seen.

Along about 1939 my little crippled buddy was shot from a horse and killed. I didn't understand 'Why' and went out that night and cursed the stars and dared them to fall. Then I met 'Ronnie' at Pine Grove Church and watched over the years as he grew into a strong man, except in mind, and when he became unmanageable at home, they had to send him away. With his arms around my neck he wanted to know if I would come see him sometime, "Because you're my buddy, I love you," he said. I never did and I'm sorry. He lived to be fifty-four years old. They brought him back home to Lee County for burial.

A little later, at this same church, I got the worst taste of embarrassment of my life when my cousin shoved me through the door of the church while they were praying.

I wrote of two people who peddled crepe paper flowers all over Lee County and I called them 'Humble Bones.' And of the old, pegleg man who died and whose face froze to the floor.

I told of an old man that kept telling me that I didn't have any sense, and maybe he was right. And of another who was left alone that I called, 'Five Acres, More or Less.'

Then there was me and my buddy, Clarence, when we got trapped in that church with rattlesnakes all around us. Later we both cried when I was trying to make up my mind whether to go home from the Army in World War Two. I was eligible to go, but didn't, and for that I stand proud.

I've told you of the talking 'Sycamore Tree' at St. Charles and the

legend of 'Doc Odell'; of Cecil Evans on his journey home and Harden Stapleton standing as tall as Old Stone Face.

I marveled at the mystery of a mothers love; told you of my woman and crossed Black Mountain with the women of long ago, their frail bodies laden with milk, butter and vegetables to peddle in the mining camps. I told you about my silver dollar that means so much to me.

I wrote of the best man I ever knew and titled it 'He Stands in the Front Ranks'; and of my uncle who gave me a job that meant so much to me. He was my uncle by marriage but he was as close to me as any of my blood uncles.

Then there was 'The Window of Love' and I stored it away in the warmest part of my heart. I tried to say goodbye to a dying man. I will never forget that.

Then there was another uncle who said, "Seems like I ain't seen you in a hundred years or more." He died shortly after that and I miss him more every day.

The old Sycamore Tree talked again when my Uncle George L. passed away. I seen most of a family die out in a few short years and seems I never had the time to sit down and talk with them; for that I am sad. I tried to take you with me on the journey of the old, retired miner and to the homecoming of a young man's plot of ground.

Then there was the country boy who finally made it home to fly with angel bands. And the broken down, rodeo cowboy who dreams of his ranch out west. And my blind friend whose memories are treasured up in my heart.

I stood high atop Lee County on Elk Knob and looked back over forty years and more, to the times when I would visit my grandparents there. The best days of my life.

I picked up an old dog in Tennessee, called him 'Hitch Hiker' and let him live out his life in my backyard in the sun that soothed his aching bones.

I walked among the headstones at the national cemetery in Marietta and said, 'They fought a good fight, but nobody gives a damn.' Of course, lots of people still do but their numbers are dwindling. Then I visited the Confederate Cemetery where 'They Sleep Peacefully' and wondered if I was one of them resting there. Although I don't believe in reincarnation, I feel a strange longing for those bygone days.

I told you of my kind of store and of the things I miss. And finally I told you of three young men who, in 1985, reached for the stars and found the heavens. I didn't mention a lot of people that I should have.

I remembered my Uncle Wright who gave me advice when I was young. I didn't listen much but, as I've grown older, I appreciate it more and more. It's hard for me to tell him, so I hope he reads it here.

I poked a little fun but mostly at myself. I hope I didn't offend anyone. I'm afraid my stories have been painfully simple and I apologize. My education won't allow me to do much better.

You might say I dwelled on the past too much and buried too many people, but the past is my life. There comes a time in life when the future don't hold too much promise.



So you take the future and allow me the past. Someday you, too, may look back on your life and say to all your memories, 'Gone, But Not Too Far.'

A certain fellow wanted me to mention his name and say something about him. Chapter after chapter I've tried to fit him in somewhere but what can you say about somebody that sits in front of the television day after day, drinking beer.

Just the other day he said, "Don't forget me now, think about it." I just want him to know that I didn't forget. I'm still thinking about it.